

WARFARE AND WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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The present article explores the often ambivalent relationship our ancient sources had with the role of women in times of war, from the Homeric to the early Byzantine period. The article takes the view that these roles were not something invariably imposed by men, but were part of a more general societal development, in which women as much as men supported the status quo, and for a variety of reasons.¹

Keywords: Greek / Athenian / Roman women; offensive / defensive warfare; weapons; honour.

Introduction

Campaign narratives, battle strategies, the careers of great generals — these were the staple of both ancient writers of history and scholars before the mid-20th century. Both were writing for their peers, mainly elite white males of their own cultures. But an interest in excluded groups, often called the ‘other’ or even the ‘subaltern’ in scholarship,² gained ground in the second half of the 20th century, and in the last decade or two the subject of war itself is now being examined for information on groups that were not at the top of the social hierarchy — and that is what the present article aims to contribute to. Here we will be examining the experiences of a group who had little or no voice in the records of war, that area considered central to the identity of the elite male figures. For the voices of women and other marginalised groups in the arena of war, we need to not only read between the lines of the literary works of antiquity, but also need to include documentary sources and visual imagery.³

War in the ancient Mediterranean

Initiating a war is an attempt at domination over another, even if, as is often claimed in the ancient sources, this is to avoid being subjugated oneself, or in aid

¹ I would like to express my gratitude for the comments and suggestions of the two anonymous reviewers, which enhanced the present article.

² Terms adopted from structural anthropology and postcolonialism. See Gruen 2011:1–3 for notions of the ‘Other’ across a number of civilisations.

³ Particularly the latter two are the elements from which a ‘cultural history’ will emerge, as outlined by Tulloch 2013:3. The time frame for the present article starts with the Homeric period and concludes with the last wars fought by Roman armies under Justinian. Points of evolution have been highlighted, as well as useful resources on particular aspects which deal with the points in greater depth.

of an ally.⁴ Even if victory over the other is not intended as long-term domination, as in the case of most of the Greek wars up to the classical period, it is still an equivalent of chest-thumping dominance for the victor and a harsh reality of the ancient world for the losers, particularly those groups who in terms of social status, ethnicity and/or gender were already subjugated.⁵

The focus here will be on conflict and violence as a sanctioned mode of conduct in the ancient societies of Greece and Rome, one which, in contrast to our Western modern views on war, was a ‘natural’, even an honoured practice, in the eyes of that society.⁶ Most people today would agree that warfare played a central role in the ancient Mediterranean, from Bronze Age Greece to the period of late antiquity.⁷ In part this is because elite male citizens writing for members of their own group reflected a view that saw warfare as an excellent arena in which to display their culture of intense male rivalry.⁸ As a result there was little of a counter-war or pacifist narrative — certainly nothing like our social media today. The elites had control of the narrative and typically embedded an ideological angle that legitimised and honoured their own role in war.

Even so, there is not much doubt that, when looking at the Greco-Roman period, warfare was either immediately present, or formed an influential backdrop, for a substantial part of the period studied here, even though it may have not been an immediate reality for every individual. During the classical period the city-state of Athens, for example, was at war on average two years out of every three; on the other hand, under the Roman empire, wars were less frequent. The temple of Janus in Rome, which was closed when peace reigned, was closed only twice up to the time of Augustus, but the city had many years of peace during the early empire.⁹

⁴ This is often styled the *bellum iustum* or ‘just war’, versions of which have been included from Thucydides 5.105 to Augustine (for example in his *Reply to Faustus the Manichean* 22). Discussion in Woolf 1996:346.

⁵ Such victories were sometimes represented as rape through roles of sexual dominance and submission, as discussed by Hall 1995:111–112: allegorically Greece over Persia, Rome over Britannia and Armenia.

⁶ There were of course many other forms of violence in the ancient world, ranging from piracy and brigandage to insurrections and revolts. On war viewed as natural, without shame or affectation, see Rihll 1995:77–78. A just war as above n.4 is of course more honourable than an unjust one. See also definitions of war in Shipley 1995:7–8.

⁷ Some ancient thinkers such as Aristotle or Cicero (particularly *De republica* Book 3) did ponder why there was so much military conflict in the ancient Mediterranean world; see also the survey of scholarship on the *bellum iustum* by Cursi 2014, *Index* 42:569–585.

⁸ As presented by epic poets from Homer *Iliad* 1.1–2, and ancient historiographers from Herodotus 1.1 and Thucydides 1.1.1–2 onwards. As Tacitus remarks at *Germania* 14, ‘renown is more easily won among perils’. On masculinity and war, see Alston 2013:205–222.

⁹ Livy *Ab urbe condita* 1.19.2–3; discussion in Rawlings 2011:47.

War moved further away from the main cities during the *pax Romana*, but in late antiquity it once again was experienced by many main centres across the empire.¹⁰

Where waging offensive or defensive war played such a large role, it is inevitable that this not only influenced social development but also impacted on all levels of ancient society, from king (or emperor) to slave.

The history of women during wartime

For the entire period of antiquity, and in fact well beyond that, the typical view of a warrior society that men are intrinsically more valuable than women and that therefore women are ‘naturally’ subordinate to men, prevailed. Women were therefore, particularly in Greek societies, marginalised, and in historiography have a tendency to form ancillary themes to the narrative about male figures.¹¹ Nevertheless, although women initially are portrayed as playing a very small role in the history of warfare, towards the end of our period some of them, such as the Severan women or Theodora, became respected political players with influence and effect that was visible even if still indirect. Although women often played more of a political role in influencing military events, they are over time given a greater share in the historical narrative of ancient writers.

The indirect role — a woman’s advice

As memorably described in one of our earliest Greek sources, Andromache advises her husband, Hector, not to go into battle in the Trojan War, and Hector responds: ‘But go into the house and take care of your own work, the loom and the distaff, and bid your servants to go about their work. But war will be the concern of the men’.¹² The exclusion of women and the rejection of their advice was a theme taken up again when Aristophanes made this the theme of his comedy, the *Lysistrata*, performed in Athens in 411 BCE. When *Lysistrata*’s character speaks, she repeatedly remarks that husbands tell their wives to keep quiet and mind their own business.¹³ These two early sources would seem to indicate that women presented no serious threat to male control of the domain of war (or it would hardly be a source for laughter in the second case).¹⁴ But there are some instances where

¹⁰ As illustrated in Harris 2016:1–15.

¹¹ For example, in Sallust *The war with Catiline* 25; Tacitus *Annals* 12–14. For further discussion on women in Livy: Smethurst 1950; Stevenson 2011, and for treatment of women in Tacitus: Baldwin 1972; Marshall 1984–1986; Swindle 2003, mainly arguing a rhetorical use of female figures (in the *Annals* in particular).

¹² *Iliad* 6.490–492. Discussion in Rousseau 2015:15–33.

¹³ Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 516–520.

¹⁴ By contrast, when the main theme is not war, as in the *Odyssey*, women are sometimes presented with more agency. Although Telemachus dismisses his mother, Penelope,

women's advice made small but real changes in the course of history, such as in Xenophon's account of the revolution at Corinth in 392 BCE, where the mothers and sisters dissuade some of the young men from choosing exile, or, more famously, the advice of Theodora to Justinian on the occasion of the Nika riots of 532 CE, which persuaded the emperor and his council not to flee the city.¹⁵ But in the reality of classical Athens, involved for decades in ongoing wars, women taking advisory action was limited to the stage. Roman women were similarly restricted in this area (although they may have had more freedom in others), and examples like Veturia berating Coriolanus in Livy's version are the exception.¹⁶

Victims of warfare?

For the most part, however, women are represented as having virtually no agency in warfare and are most often depicted as its sufferers. Our earliest account relates how a war was fought to regain a woman, the famous Helen of Troy, but Helen herself is not depicted as having any say in the matter in either her departure or her recapture.¹⁷ Stereotypical images of women wailing, mourning the war dead, and being captured and enslaved are consistently employed in our sources.¹⁸ Of course these stereotypes were a realistic reflection of Graeco-Roman ideals for citizen wives and daughters. As many previous studies have demonstrated, the successful control of their women contributed to male honour, whereas disgrace was signalled by women who went beyond the control of their men, either by their own doing or that of others.¹⁹ Women were the enemy's most precious possession, the bearers of future generations, and their capture underscored defeat and subjugation.²⁰ Rousing speeches to soldiers preparing to head into battle often make reference to why they

from his duel with her suitors (*Odyssey* 21.350–353), she can make her own decisions as to remarriage, for example. Cf. Franco 2012:58–59; Gardner 1989:51–62.

¹⁵ Xenophon *Hellenica* 4.4.5; Procopius *Wars* 1.24.33–38; pertinent discussion of the latter by Greatrex 1997:73.

¹⁶ Veturia was the mother of Coriolanus Livy 2.40.

¹⁷ This situation too was transferred to the comic stage by Aristophanes *Acharnians* 524–529, whose character Dikaiopolis claims that the war of 432/1 BCE against Sparta had been initiated by Pericles to regain two prostitutes from Aspasia's brothel; cf. Franco 2012:7 on women as objects over which men fight, either to defend or to acquire.

¹⁸ Typical examples are to be found in the *Iliad* 1.29–31; in Herodotus 8.32–33; Virgil *Aeneid* 3.320–324; Livy 5.21.11, 26.13.14–15; Appian *Hannibalic war* 7.9.58. Discussion in Van Wees 1998:10–53.

¹⁹ For discussion on the shame-and-honour context, see Wikan 1984:635–652.

²⁰ A 5th century CE inscription set up by Silko, a Christian Ethiopian chieftain, reveals a typical ancient Mediterranean mindset and reads: 'For those who offer me resistance, I carry off their women and children'. *CIG* III, 5072.

were fighting, and what they had to protect. The threat that the enemy was planning to maltreat their women was a popular incentive.²¹

The image of women as a background to the wars in which men were engaged, as presented in our sources, is therefore often a one-dimensional stereotype and reality.²² Many works such as the *Iliad* or the *Trojan women* of Euripides are not unsympathetic to women's plight during the war, but no other fate for them seems possible. What happens to them is presented as their lot, very similarly to the way in which slaves and other non-elite groups are treated — their condition is an inescapable fate.

In the ancient Greek world, the execution of the women of the defeated enemy was rare.²³ The enslavement of women and children could bring a handsome profit. In fact, the captivity and enslavement of women as a corollary of defeat becomes a common theme from the Roman period and is used quite commonly to portray the humiliation of the enemy.²⁴ Throughout the tales of conquest across the Mediterranean such events are routine, from all sides: in late antiquity, when the Moors in Africa fought the Romans, they killed the men and enslaved the wives and children; likewise the Byzantine commander Solomon in his turn killed the Moorish men and enslaved their women and children.²⁵

While there are accounts of the evacuation of women and children,²⁶ where this was not possible, rape was another consequence of defeat, and certainly a risk after enslavement.²⁷ In fact, a number of semi-historical episodes see this even as the purpose of war and the obtaining of wives, from the Ionians to the Romans.²⁸

²¹ Thucydides 7.68.2–69.2; 8.74 3; Polybius 9.39.3; Diodorus Siculus 14.66.5. Also attributed to the Germanic tribes by Tacitus *Germania* 8.1.

²² In epic poetry, for example, the captured women of the enemy are described in similar ways, from the Trojan women, *Iliad* 24.725–746, to the Moorish women in the 6th century CE, Corippus *The Libyan war* 6.82–89. These captive women are the expression of 'the ultimate Other'.

²³ Schaps 1982:202 suggests that this may have been due to a general feeling against the killing of women. Diodorus at 13.56–57, for example, decries the indiscriminate killing of the men and women of Selinus by the Carthaginians, even though the women had actually joined in the fighting. But see exceptions in Thucydides 5.116.3.

²⁴ 'Rape was, in fact, part of a soldier's spoils', Gibson 2018:270; there is a large volume of reference material on this but see Vikman 2005:28–29; Dillon 2006:26, with further references in n.48.

²⁵ Procopius *Wars* 4.8.22; 4.14.9; 4.11.56; 4.21.14. On the column of Marcus Aurelius, women are centrally involved as victims of violence, discussion in Dillon 2006:246.

²⁶ Herodotus 8.41. Diodorus Siculus 13.61.4–6; 13.88–89; 13.111.1, 3.

²⁷ Discussion with many examples in Card 1996:5–18.

²⁸ Herodotus 1.146; 2. 74; 6.138; Livy 1.7–1.13

More historical accounts of the sack of a city do not mention rape as often,²⁹ but Plutarch's account of the fall of the city of Pellene to the Aeolians in 241/0, with the soldiers seizing loot and grabbing the Pellenians' wives and daughters, was probably not uncommon.³⁰ Commanders who were able to control their troops and prevent them from pillaging and rape sometimes receive praise because this would make their continued presence in a region more acceptable to the defeated peoples.³¹ Such decisions were not for humane reasons, they were entirely pragmatic.

Behind every successful man ...

Medea may have bewailed a woman's lot in war on stage, and Sappho may rate love above male desires of 'chariots and fully armed infantry', but women also subscribed to and supported the dominant ethos.³² Spartan mothers allegedly told their sons on their way to war to 'return with your shield or on it'.³³ Mothers, wives and daughters across the ancient world, whether in Sparta, Athens or Rome, may have felt ambivalent about their menfolk heading off to the battlefield, but they also had a share in the honour of husbands and particularly sons, and a vested interest in the victory of their city.³⁴ There were many indirect ways in which Greek and Roman women supported the war effort. Since men during the time of the propertied citizen-warrior were regularly away from their property, management of the domain sometimes fell to the wife as a matter of necessity,

²⁹ Schaps 1982:203 attributes the shortage of references to rape in the Greek sources to the general Greek attitude to *citizen* women (which was of course voided as soon as they became captives and slaves).

³⁰ Plutarch *Aratus* 31, discussed in Schaps 1982:203. Roman sources are less reticent, for example Tacitus *Annals* 14.35.1

³¹ Procopius *Wars* 3.16.1–8.

³² Euripides *Medea* 236–251; Sappho *Fragments* 16; 132. Discussion in De Pauw 2014: 55–80.

³³ Plutarch *On moral virtue* 241. This story may have been added after Thermopylae, Buidghagen 2017:207–220. There are a great many such stories which, although they are not all historical, reveal a general mentality. Herodotus 9.5.3 relates that in 479 BCE, when the Persians sacked Athens, Mardonius sent a peace proposal to the Athenian *boulē* in Salamis. When one Athenian spoke in favour of the proposal, the Athenians stoned him to death, after which 'the wives of the Athenians learned what had happened; and with the women encouraging each other and taking up the cry, they attacked Lycides' house on their own initiative, and stoned both his wife to death and his children to death'. A number of other examples provided by Schaps 1982:198. On sons and mothers in Sparta in particular, Schrader 2011:4–26.

³⁴ While the loss of a husband, father or brother, could have unfortunate consequences for widows and marriageable daughters, this would have been preferable to enslavement. See further examples and discussion in Loman 2004:35.

such as in the case of Penelope, in the absence of Odysseus. Spartan women were even known to have played a role in the governance of the state while their husbands were at war.³⁵ Other forms of support may have been less voluntary: Livy reports that in the reforms of Servius Tullius certain widows were assessed to pay two thousand asses annually for the upkeep of the horses for the cavalry.³⁶ During the Roman Republic and the triumviral period matrons are known to have publicly protested against such legislations.³⁷

Active participation in war

In warfare a woman's role was ideologically delimited to supporting the dominant male creed, and Thucydides' comment, often quoted, that the virtue of women was to be least talked about among men, is largely upheld in all our early sources.³⁸ In terms of Greek and Roman ideologies, therefore, fighting, particularly with weapons like swords, was seen as extraordinary for women and *παρὰ φύσιν* ('contrary to nature').³⁹ But there is not a total silence on female participation during war, even if some Attic writers implied that true bravery was beyond their capacity by virtue of their sex.⁴⁰ Women throwing projectiles such as rooftiles has been described more than once, and even felled Pyrrhus from the top of a house in 272 BCE.⁴¹ Pausanias also relates how the women of Argos, under the leadership of the poetess Telesilla who armed them, 'fought valiantly' against the enemy when the city was on the point of defeat.⁴² According to Plutarch, the women were honoured with a memorial next to their graves celebrating their bravery.⁴³ Across the entire period, women are also recorded in active but not participatory roles, helping in the digging of trenches and building walls during sieges, or providing

³⁵ See discussion in Cartledge 1981:84–105.

³⁶ Livy 1.43.10–11. Presumably such widows were wealthy, since Livy follows this with the statement that the obligations were moved from the poor on to the wealthy, who then received greater privileges along with these obligations.

³⁷ Valerius Maximus 8.3.3; Livy 24.1.5; 34.1–7; Appian *Civil wars* 4.32–34.

³⁸ Thucydides 2.45. Although Spartan women, like their men, may have undergone training to improve their physical capacity, this was not to prepare them for war but rather so that they might produce healthy children, and, as Powell points out, Athenian writers would have been sure to point out the anomaly had they engaged on the battlefield, Powell 2001:248–252.

³⁹ Thucydides 3.74.1. See also Livy 2.13.6, 28.19.13–14; Tacitus *Histories* 2.63; *Annals* 2.55 for similar examples.

⁴⁰ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 1231–1232; Sophocles *Antigone* 449. See further discussion and examples in Penrose 2016:26–27.

⁴¹ Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 34.2; discussed by Barry 1996:55.

⁴² Pausanias 2.20.9.

⁴³ Plutarch *On the bravery of women* 4.245C–E. In another instance, the Tegean women also armed themselves and helped to defeat the Spartan invaders, Pausanias 8.48.4.

food and drink to the soldiers and caring for the wounded.⁴⁴ So there were times when it was ‘all hands on deck’ — every person, irrespective of age or gender, was expected to help in the defence of the city.⁴⁵

But when the war ended, the women returned to their homes, ‘since they no longer thought it suitable to busy themselves with the work of war’.⁴⁶ As Gillian Clark and others have noted, women fighting in times of war were still the exception to the rule — women who supported the male war effort did so mainly in defensive warfare, and in times of crisis, and then returned to their conventional domestic role, seeking no military glory for themselves.⁴⁷

Our Roman writers are reticent on what must surely have been a very similar situation in warfare. It would seem that they had a particular bias against ordinary Roman women featuring in accounts of sieges and battles. This may simply be because the women of Rome itself did not come under actual siege by outsiders until the 5th century CE, but a growing literary tradition of non-Roman women’s enthusiastic participation in battle may also account for it.⁴⁸ In the brief description of Diodorus Siculus, the women of the Gauls are described as strong and courageous, but before long, Celtic women are brandishing swords and axes until by the time of Ammianus Marcellinus in the 4th century CE they are described as dangerous and fearsome (rather implausibly since they used no weapons).⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Diodorus Siculus 13.89; 13.108–111; Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 27.2–5; 29.4; Polyaeus 8.49; *The life of Genovefae, monumenta Germanicae historica (Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum)* 3.26, 35. But women’s presence could also be construed as a hindrance in a conflict. Spartan women in particular are criticised that they were incapable of handling weapons even in a crisis, could not stand the smoke caused by the ravaging enemy (the Thebans) at Leuctra, and created even more of a confused din than the enemy. Plato *Laws* 805e–806b; Xenophon *Hellenica* 6.5.28; Aristotle *Politics* 2.1269b, 35–39. As Powell 2001:249 comments, ‘the military contribution of female Spartiates on the rare occasion of trial was not praiseworthy’. Discussion of women in supportive roles by Loman 2004.

⁴⁵ More examples with discussion in Georgoudi 2015:202–203, 210.

⁴⁶ Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 29.6.

⁴⁷ Clark 1989:29: ‘Real power was acceptable only if it was temporary, exercised in special circumstances by a woman doing what remained a man’s job ... Artemisia was a widow standing in for her husband’. See also McHugh 2012:78–80; Payen 2015:221. Schaps 1982:207–208 has commented on the paucity of evidence for women in this context in the Greek world, which he ascribes to the high value ancient Greek society put on women not displaying themselves to men other than those in their own family.

⁴⁸ Lusitanian and Hispanic women fought with swords alongside their men in Appian *Spanish wars* 6.12.72; 71–72, Plutarch *On moral virtue* 248e. Other women fighting in Polybius 15.30.9–10; Livy 5.21.10; Tacitus *Agricola* 16; *Annals* 14.35–36; *Germania* 18. Discussed in Kelly 2008:37 and Saavedra 1999:59.

⁴⁹ Diodorus Siculus 5.32.2; Plutarch *Marius* 19.7; Ammianus Marcellinus *Res gestae* 15.12.1. Plutarch also relates a similar incident in *Marius* 27.1–3, where the Cimbrian

This seems more like a growing stereotype and Othering of the enemy where validating the contrasting Roman gender norms outweighed historical accuracy. It is more likely that the role of the non-Roman women was one of spurring men on (as battle spectators or enacting rituals with incantations and torches), than physical engagement in hand-to-hand fighting, as described by Tacitus.⁵⁰ Such roles are also evidenced in other cultures, both ancient and in later times, as diverse as the Indian Aryans and the Zulu kingdom.

There is a curious scene depicted on Trajan's column where women are shown to be torturing captives who appear to be Dacian soldiers. Since it was common in Roman sources to associate 'barbarian' women with such violence, it is likely that they could be non-Roman camp followers.⁵¹ The fact that *women* are torturing the soldiers is of course seen as particularly humiliating for the defeated Dacians in this scene.

Leading the troops — manly women and womanish men

Compared to particularly Athenian women, Roman women came to enjoy a certain amount of freedom by the end of the 1st century CE. Nevertheless, in the context of war each was subject to a stereotypical ideal that was frequently called upon until the end of antiquity and contrasted with the censured image of the warrior queen. Particularly Roman writers wrote about the actions of foreign warrior queens in a way that emphasised their 'barbarian' nature, in opposition to their own Graeco-Roman culture.

The mythical foreign female warrior, the Amazon, became the archetypes for foreign warrior queens for all Greek and Roman writers, embodying the

women continued to fight when the men were killed, and when they saw that defeat was near, killed their children and themselves, contrasted with the Roman attitude implied at *Marius* 16.4: 'What cowardice, pray, has Marius discovered in us that he keeps us out of battle like women under lock and key?'

⁵⁰ Tacitus *Histories* 4.18; *Germania* 8.1; 7.2; 20 sees the women of the enemy in a hortative role, urging their men into battle, rather than participating themselves. These are described as women with dishevelled hair bearing torches, and not, as supposed by Santoro L'Hoir 1994:9, engaged in actual fighting. This image of women on the periphery of the action is also borne out by the depiction of women (Roman and of other cultures) in the scenes on the column of Trajan (with one exception discussed in this section, below). Schaps 1982:198–199 has several examples of women exhorting men to fight in Greek literature. More examples from ancient literature in Fuhrer 2015:52–70; De Pauw 2014 has many examples from earliest records to the present; Sémelin 2007:28 discusses the general phenomenon of women as onlookers, encouraging men in battle, such as at Plutarch *Pyrrhus* 34.2 cited above. Further modern examples in Goldstein 2001:301–322.

⁵¹ Detailed discussion in Kampen 1995, who proposes this explanation.

uncivilised world.⁵² Herodotus' account of Queen Artemisia of Halicarnassus, who fought on the Persian side in 480 BCE against the Greek city states, is well known. Herodotus (who was also originally from Halicarnassus) expresses admiration and comments on her 'manly courage', but also tells us that the Athenians, who found it 'terrible' that a woman should be fighting against them, offered an enormous reward of 10 000 drachmae for her capture (7.99). Implicitly or even explicitly, women's assumption of the manly role in warfare cast a slur on the manliness of the men associated with them. When men were called 'women', as Menelaos does in the *Iliad*, Xerxes in Herodotus' *Persian wars*, or Marius' soldiers cited above, this is tantamount to being called weak, even cowardly.⁵³

During the Hellenistic period many women rose to the fore in the field of warfare, often as regents, women such as Olympias, who was ultimately defeated by Cassander at Pydna in 316 BCE, or Ada, queen of Caria, who commanded her own troops at Halicarnassus. During the Roman period a number of warrior queens pitted their forces against the empire. Queen Teuta of the Ardiaei in Illyria, who reigned briefly in the mid-3rd century BCE, is described by Polybius as waging numerous wars. The historian also pronounces her as arrogant, and she is correspondingly humbled in defeat against the Romans and made to pay tribute (2.4.8). Polybius also describes her as petulant, responding to the Roman emissaries 'like a woman', in anger, heedless of the consequences (2.8.12). This lack of self-restraint was a common theme used for women who encroached on male preserves, which then in turn justified their being subject to male authority.⁵⁴

Probably the most famous of these queens was the vilified Cleopatra VII, but other queens did not fare much better in ancient writings. However, Boudicca in Britain and Zenobia in Palmyra did not excite as much attention in Tacitus and Ammianus Marcellinus as these authors' own Roman empresses did.⁵⁵ Tacitus

⁵² General overview in Stanton & Stewart 1995:571–597. Limited evidence supports the assumption of the Amazons' actual existence. Tombs where women were buried with spears, swords and shields — even a full suit of armour — have been unearthed east of the Don river in the Ukraine. This only proves that some women were warriors.

⁵³ In the *Iliad* at 7.80, Menelaos addresses the men and calls them women for not rising eagerly to meet Hector's challenge. Xerxes, observing Artemisia's attack on another ship, says that 'my men have become women and my women, men' (Herodotus 8.88). In the Roman context women play a cardinal role when Tacitus wishes to denigrate a *princeps* and cast aspersions on his lack of authority; and there are many accounts of 'effeminate emperors and virilised women', Benoist 2015:266–267.

⁵⁴ Tacitus refers to this lack of self-control as *muliebris inpotentia*, particularly in reference to Livia at *Ann.* 1.4.5, and Agrippina Minor at 12.57.2.

⁵⁵ On Boudicca: Tacitus *Annals* 14.35; *Agricola* 16.1, 31.4; Cassius Dio 62.3–7. Zenobia: Ammianus Marcellinus 28.4.9; *Historia Augusta: Aurelianus* 22.1. See Santoro L'Hoir 1994:6–7 on Tacitus' depiction of women as military commanders.

refers to them all in the class of *feminae duces*, women who were un-Roman not only in associating themselves with bloodshed and warfare, but also in aiming for, or even exercising, *imperium*.⁵⁶ Such women had no legal authority, but wielded power through their immediate family connections, women such as Agrippina the Elder, so popular with the legions, or Julia Domna, the wife of Septimius Severus, who was given the title ‘mother of the camps’ by the soldiers.

Women were therefore not as marginalised as may be supposed from the record, but one may be sure that when manly courage was accorded to them, it was not meant as a compliment by the writer.

Conclusion

Valour was almost exclusively the preserve of men and being publicly honoured for that valour remained overwhelmingly the preserve of the elite male. If you were not at the top of the social hierarchy of the ancient world, it meant, firstly, that your story — that of sub-elite classes, of other ethnic groups and of women — was tangential to that of the male elite warrior. Fortunately for us, this tangential information reveals that women and other marginalised groups played more of a role in the military conflicts of their cities than might be supposed.

Since, in times of war, the consequences of defeat could entail loss of land, enslavement and various other forms of victimisation, even if you were not fighting on the battlefield, in times of crisis it was in the interest of every inhabitant of a besieged city to play a role, however small, in its defence — the poor, the disabled, slaves and women.

Polarisation of the Other was intensified in periods of extreme conflict, and often a narrative of propaganda in the hands of the elite. War was therefore a great catalyst of polarities which defined and boosted the identity of those who engaged in battle. It therefore also intensified polarities in the areas of class and gender: it was thought shameful for a soldier to be identified with the Other, a slave or a woman. At least in the case of women it was equally disgraceful (certainly in the eyes of male writers) to be called ‘manly’. But if Greek and Roman women played an unobtrusive and supportive role in war, this could be acknowledged and even honoured. If they showed signs of aiming at leading roles in the unfolding drama of war, they were singled out by the ancient writers and identified with the ultimate Other, the ‘barbarian’ woman.

⁵⁶ *Feminae duces*, first used by Virgil for Dido, is taken up by Tacitus when speaking of barbarian queens like Boudicca in *Agricola* 16.1; 31.4; see also *Annals* 14.35.1. Discussion in Santoro L’Hoir 1994:6–13, and Ginsberg 2006:112–116. For Agrippina the Elder compared with *duces feminae* in Tacitus, see McHugh 2012:73, with further references to scholarship on Tacitus’ description of Agrippina as ferocious, n.6.

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