

**MYTH, RITUAL, AND THE WARRIOR IN ROMAN AND  
INDO-EUROPEAN ANTIQUITY**

Roger D. Woodard examines the figure of the returning warrior as depicted in the myths of several ancient and medieval Indo-European cultures. In these cultures, the returning warrior was often portrayed as a figure rendered dysfunctionally destructive or isolationist by the horrors of combat. This mythic portrayal of the returned warrior is consistent with modern studies of similar behavior among soldiers returning from war.

Woodard's research identifies a common origin of these myths in the ancestral Proto-Indo-European culture, in which rites were enacted to enable warriors to reintegrate themselves as functional members of society. Woodard also compares the Italic, Indo-Iranian, and Celtic mythic traditions surrounding the warrior, paying particular attention to Roman myth and ritual, notably to the aetiologies and rites of the July festivals of the Poplifugia and Nonae Caprotinae and to the October rites of the Sororium Tigillum.

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# Myth, Rítual, and the Warrior in Roman and Indo-European Antiquity

**ROGER D. WOODARD**

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*For my father, RDW,*

*who was saved from the warrior's fate by the accident of time and place,*

*and*

*For my mother, WOW,*

*who, like countless mothers before and since, knew Thetis's dread, but was spared its realization.*

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## Preface

Particularly vivid memories surviving from a 1950s childhood are those of riding in the back seat of a 1951 Pontiac coupe, speeding along eastern North Carolina rural roads on periodic night runs from my grandparent's home to my own, some fifty miles away. A thick and marvelous darkness and nocturnal stillness engulfed the car and its passengers mile after mile. Inevitably the immediacy of the sheltering blackness that wrapped the world would reluctantly and briefly recede as the car approached the lights of the small Johnston County town of Kenly. The patience demanded by a slow trawl through the deserted three or four blocks of the town's main street was rewarded by a rapid re-acceleration into deep darkness.

Some nights, however, bathed in the light of the tall street lamp that stood at the corner of Church and Second, there would be standing a man – a man as brilliantly illuminated against the surrounding darkness as any actor who has ever plied the tragedizing craft beneath a spotlight in any theater gone dark. The man – if he *was* a man – and not some infernal apparition drawn to the light like the bats that flew overhead gorging on moths – and he must have been a man, for he had a name – let us call him B. – raged like a storm. With flailing limbs and taut, arching spine he fought an enemy that none could see – none but B. His face was contorted, more beastly than human, and from between corrugated lips, harshly misshapen by the fury that possessed him, there poured incomprehensible streams of screaming speech.

As the Pontiac sped on into the night, the driver – my father – would predictably utter, in a still voice weighted down by empathy: “He was in the war – he was shell-shocked.”

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – America's military involvement in Vietnam brought it to our attention. More recent forays into the Asian world have kept it there. Its later twentieth- and twenty-first-century manifestations made many – at least in America – almost forget that it was a

phenomenon of the great World Wars as well; but fortunately there have been those who rekindled the memory.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is a scourge that did not begin with the horrors of the Somme. Recent work has extended our awareness: during and following the American Civil War, Union and Confederate soldiers alike suffered in its grip.<sup>2</sup> It is, however, a debilitating disorder far, far older than that conflict. How could it not be? The ancient warrior knew it too;<sup>3</sup> and ancient society wrestled with its consequences.

This book begins with a close examination of two ancient Roman festivals, celebrated annually on July 5 and July 7. The two are variations on a single theme, which I argue is that of the response of society to the post-combat dysfunctionality of the warrior. It is an expression of an ideology and practices inherited by the Romans from their own ancestors: the festivals are ritual realizations of a mythic motif that is widely attested among Indo-European peoples, of whom the Romans are but one. The motif is that of the rage and isolationism exhibited by the Indo-European warrior following combat: certain fundamental features characterize the ancestral mythic tradition and the Roman festivals alike – features that constitute elements of the warrior’s experience and society’s response to that experience.

Following an overview of the several Indo-European mythic traditions and of elements of Roman cult, each of these fundamental features is examined in turn over the course of six chapters, together with their various expressions in historical Indo-European cultures. The book concludes with summary and interpretative thoughts on ancestral Indo-European ritual practices and the Roman instantiations of those practices from the particular perspective preserved in, among other rites, those of July 5 and July 7.

Feast Day of St. Thomas Becket

“My Lord! these are not men, these come not as men come, but  
 Like maddened beasts”

The Priest to Becket at the approach of the Knights

T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*

<sup>1</sup> Such as Shephard 2001; Barham 2004; Childers 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See Dean 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the comparisons made between ancient Greek combat experience and that of Vietnam-era GIs in Palaima 2000; Shay 1994, 2002; and Tritle 2000. See also, *inter alia*, Tatum 2003; Weil (Holoka) 2003; as well as Tuchman 1997.

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Voicing one's gratitude to individuals who have provided inspiration, assistance, and support for an undertaking such as this one always elicits a certain degree of discomfort when one realizes the breadth and width of the debt and the impossibility of adequately acknowledging all deserving of such recognition. This, however, does not provide the author with an excuse to invoke non-offending silence in the matter of thanks. And so, beyond those scholars upon whose work I build, who are credited by name in the pages that follow (with apologies to any whose work I have overlooked and those whose contributions have been obscured by the passage of time), there are some particular individuals who must be singled out.

Much of the research and a sizeable portion of the composing of this work were undertaken while I was visiting at the American Academy in Rome during the summers of 2009 and 2010 and at Wolfson College Oxford during Trinity term 2010. Special thanks go to the President of the American Academy, Adele Chatfield-Taylor, and the Academy's Director, Christopher Celenza, and his predecessor Carmella Franklin, and to the President of Wolfson College, Hermione Lee, and to the administrative staff at both institutions (particularly Cristina Puglisi, Pina Pasquantonio, and Gianpaolo Battaglia at the Academy and Sue Hales, Alan George, and Rose Truby at Wolfson) for their essential and kind support. I am much indebted for the library resources made available to me by both institutions – especially the Arthur and Janet Ross Library in Rome and the Wolfson College Library and Bodleian facilities in Oxford – and to the always helpful and devoted staff members (Paolo Brozzi, Denise Gavio, and Paolo Imperatori in Rome and Fiona Wilkes in Oxford, among others) of these collections of inestimable worth.

Special thanks also to the many colleagues in both Rome and Oxford who allowed me to share with them my thoughts about Roman religion, the

Poplifugia, and the trials of the ancient warrior, for their patient and receptive ears and their invaluable feedback. In this regard I think particularly of Corey Brennan, Larissa Bonfante, Peter Knox, Jim Packer, Angus Bowie, Armand D'Angour, Robert Parker, and, especially, Nick Allen. I would be remiss were I not to express my appreciation for daily sustenance in Rome to Mona Talbott and the Rome Sustainable Food Project, and to her remarkable staff, especially Francesca Gilberti. Thanks to John Kamitsuka for the inspiration of both his musical genius and the work ethic that attends it.

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