SPARTA AND THE COMMEMORATION OF WAR

The tough Spartan soldier is one of the most enduring images from antiquity. Yet Spartans, too, fell in battle – so how did ancient Sparta memorialize its wars and war dead? From the poet Tyrtaeus inspiring soldiers with rousing verse in the 7th century BCE to inscriptions celebrating the 300's last stand at Thermopylae, and from Spartan imperialists posing as liberators during the Peloponnesian War to the modern reception of the Spartan as a brave warrior defending the "West," Sparta has had an outsized role in how warfare is framed and remembered. This image has also been distorted by the Spartans themselves and their later interpreters. While debates continue to rage about the appropriateness of monuments to supposed war heroes in our civic squares, this authoritative and engaging book suggests that how the Spartans commemorated their military past, and how this shaped their military future, has perhaps never been more pertinent.

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For Cara and Kallie

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Prologue

Brasidas at Amphipolis

Thucydides, the hard-nosed realist who wrote the history of the Peloponnesian War, was not one for fanciful tales. Other writers could dazzle their audiences with stories "reeking of myth," while Thucydides would provide all future generations with a useful, if dry, accounting of human nature and why states act the way they do. Despite this reproach aimed at his fellow historians – including, perhaps, Herodotus, the "Father of History" himself – Thucydides was not immune to the charms of real-life heroes. The most obvious hero for Thucydides was Pericles, the visionary politician and general who led Athens into war with Sparta and who delivered one of the most important and memorable speeches of the Classical Greek world, the Funeral Oration. But it was a Spartan, a soldier named Brasidas, who both beat Thucydides in the military arena and evoked for the historian the dashing figure of a warrior from Homer's *Iliad* fighting on the plains of Troy during a long-lost Heroic Age.

As befitting a hero in the Homeric mold, Brasidas died in battle. A great tactician, strategist, and diplomat, Brasidas had taken the Peloponnesian War to Athens' subject states in the north Aegean, on which Athens depended for its gigantic navy's raw materials. The jewel in the crown of Athens' northern cities was Amphipolis, defensively located on a bend in the Strymon River, a few kilometers from the sea. In 424 BCE, Brasidas marched through northern Greece in the guise of a liberator against Athenian tyranny (if, perhaps, threatening a city or two with "forced freedom" should they refuse to embrace his offer of liberation), and managed to wrest many cities from Athenian control, including Amphipolis. Tasked with defending Amphipolis was none other than Thucydides, but he was away on the island of Thasos and only managed to arrive after the city had been taken, earning himself exile from Athens and thus plenty of time to write his *History*. The loss of Amphipolis hit

Athens hard (they would try to retake the city, unsuccessfully, for much of the next several decades), and Brasidas had demonstrated himself to be Athens' most dangerous enemy. Athens sent an army in 422 to retake the city, but Brasidas, after giving a rousing speech to his men, stormed out of the city gates in a bold surprise attack against his more numerous foe. Perplexed by the sudden attack, the Athenian force was broken in two, and those who avoided being killed or wounded ran for their ships on the coast. The Athenian commander, the warmongering demagogue Cleon, was killed in the action. So, too, was Brasidas, dashing into the fray to back up his inspiring words with action.

Such bravado was typical for the renowned Spartan soldier. A few years earlier, in 425, Brasidas fainted from his wounds as he stood on the deck of a warship to urge his rowers to ram their vessel against the rocky shore of Pylos. On that shore were Athenians defending the new base they were building in Spartan territory, and Brasidas saw that he needed to take any and every measure to prevent the Athenians from succeeding. While most of the Spartans lost their nerve against the Athenians at Pylos, especially once the Athenians' superior ships entered the battle, Brasidas kept up the fight at great personal risk, if to no avail in the end. In his short military career, Brasidas stood out more than any other Spartan, being the first in the Peloponnesian War to receive official commendation at Sparta for valor in the field when on another occasion he fended off a surprise amphibious attack.

The honors Brasidas received after his death surpassed all those he had enjoyed in life. The people of Amphipolis declared Brasidas their new founder and tore down all the buildings associated with their actual founder, an Athenian named Hagnon. Even more ostentatiously, the Amphipolitans buried Brasidas in the heart of the city, right next to the agora – an extraordinary honor, since Greek burials were almost always outside of the city walls. The people of Amphipolis also instituted annual games in his honor, not unlike those games Achilles held for his slain companion, Patroclus, in the *Iliad*. Another city Brasidas had liberated near Amphipolis, Acanthus, erected a treasury building – a sort of mini temple holding dedications and other valuables – in his honor at the Panhellenic shrine of Delphi, making Brasidas the first mortal man to be named on such a building since the age of Archaic tyrants centuries earlier. Finally, in Sparta itself Brasidas was given a large cenotaph, standing out among the city's monuments even hundreds of years later, and not far from the tomb of Leonidas, the hero of Thermopylae. From one end of Greece to the other, Spartans and other Greeks could see

physical monuments commemorating Brasidas' excellence, his *aretē*. And thanks to Thucydides, this Spartan's example became a Thucydidean "possession for all time."

Many readers of Thucydides have seen in Brasidas a most atypical Spartan. Where the Spartans were slow to action and stuck in their ways, Brasidas was bold and innovative. After all, he took the war to Athens' northern territories when the rest of Sparta seemed content to follow the same old strategy of invading Attica year after year; and he risked his life to dislodge the Athenians from Pylos when the rest of the Spartans were struck witless. Brasidas, however, was far more representative of Spartan military leaders than first meets the eye. Over the course of Spartan history, charismatic and ambitious warriors who sought glory and fame often led Sparta's armies. While many of these figures might have aimed at greater recognition than the Spartan authorities were prepared to give, they were doing nothing other than their Homeric exemplars had done, and Sparta, with its emphasis on and ostentatious commemoration of military prowess, implicitly encouraged them to do. How could a Spartan do anything but seek out battle and opportunities to be remembered after death? He had been raised from a young age to tolerate the harsh conditions of military life, walked regularly past the inscribed names of the Three Hundred who fought to the death at Thermopylae, and saw the cruel public humiliation of the lone Spartan who returned home alive after defeat. After 440, when Brasidas had come of age, he would have witnessed the construction of the Tomb of Leonidas, a shrine built for the repatriated remains of the dead king. In short, Sparta's emphasis on military training and the heroic dead reflected its militaristic heritage while also perpetuating it. Brasidas was merely among the most successful of Spartans doing exactly what their country expected them to do. Militarism breeds militarism.

The Spartans and other Greeks fought for many reasons, but one concern loomed over all others: to be remembered. Homer's Achilles famously chose a short but glorious life over a long but obscure one. The historian Herodotus wrote the history of the wars between Greece and Persia largely to preserve and give glory to great deeds and marvelous things done by Greeks and non-Greeks alike. Soldiers gave their lives and took the lives of others in order to be remembered by their families and communities for a long time to come. Soldiers who were remembered – in the stories of their community, in literature, inscribed on stone, or buried beneath a gleaming monument – inspired future soldiers to aim for everlasting memory too, and fight all the more eagerly and valorously on the

battlefield. Brasdias' heroic life and heroic death, as commemorated by Greece's foremost historian, a cenotaph at Sparta and another on the slopes of Delphi, and a prominent tomb and annual games at Amphipolis, provided his fellow Spartans with a shining example of what was possible for those who fought and died well. Brasidas inspired other generals to strive for unsurpassed glory. He certainly also served as a model for ordinary soldiers and citizens.

This book will explore how figures like Brasidas, and their commemoration, reflected and shaped attitudes towards war in ancient Greece, especially in Sparta. As supposedly one of the most militaristic societies in world history, the Spartans relied on the glory and memory attached to warfare in order to perpetuate their way of life and achieve continued military success. Without understanding the motives of soldiers going to war, and the way society crafted and exploited those motives to keep soldiers going to war, we cannot understand Sparta and its role in Greek history. And in light of Thucydides' famous idea that "the human thing" tends to remain the same across time and space, Spartan militarism can help us understand our own world a little better, especially given the increasing popularity of Sparta and Spartan imagery in many of today's political and activist movements. Thus, understanding how Spartan militarism worked, particularly in light of how Sparta commemorated and remembered its war dead, is a topic that is not only interesting but timely and important. If war and violence are things we really seek to avoid, we best take a look at ancient Greece's most stereotypically warlike and violent society, and how it got and stayed that way.

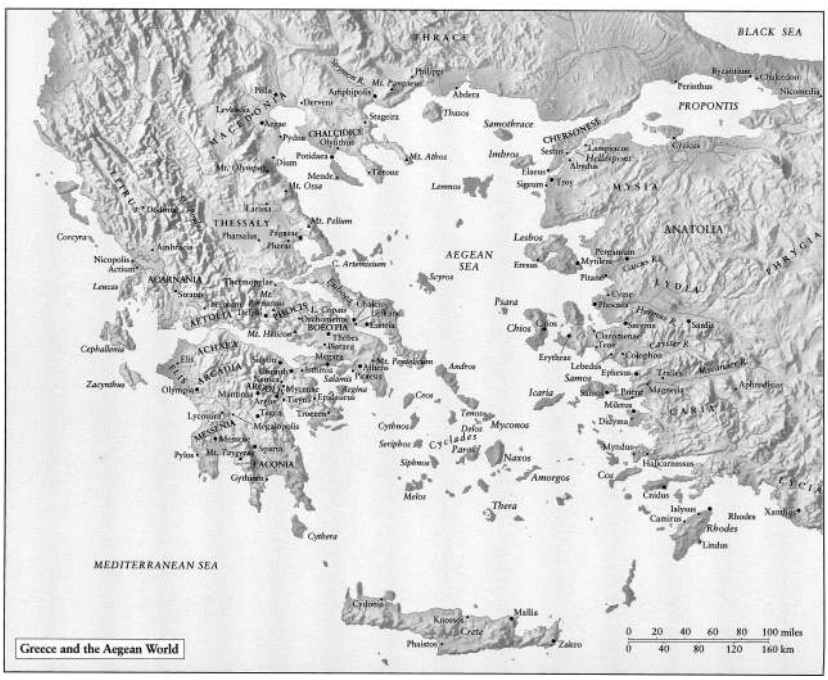
Aside from the literary monuments to fallen Spartans, including the work of Thucydides and other historians and the poetry of Tyrtaeus and Simonides, we will explore how the physical spaces of ancient Sparta were steeped in memories of the war dead. The Roman-era travel writer Pausanias tells about the many monuments scattered around the Spartan landscape that glorified war and the war dead, including not only tombs to famous fallen leaders like Brasidas and Leonidas but also an elaborate stoa supposedly adorned with spoils from Xerxes' Persian army. Archaeologists have spent the last century trying to sort out exactly what went where in the ancient Spartan city, but there is still a lot we can learn by examining Sparta's topography and monuments, nestled under the forbidding Taygetus mountain range. Sparta's archaeological museum and other museums throughout Greece contain many funerary, honorary, and votive pieces that illuminate Spartan militarism. These pieces on their own can tell us a great deal, but they also were once set up in real physical spaces.

For instance, the famous "smiling hoplite," who many have believed to be Leonidas himself, was found by the sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos, "of the Bronze House," on the Spartan acropolis. This was the very spot where another Spartan general of the Persian Wars, the ex-regent Pausanias, was starved to death after falling out of favor with the Spartan top brass, allegedly because he was too eager to glorify himself instead of all the Greeks for the victory at Plataea in 479, but more likely because he tried to take Spartan armies too far from Sparta and for too long. Spartans set up monuments in other places too, from the fabled pass at Thermopylae, to the sanctuary of Hera on the island of Samos, all of which can help us understand Spartan militarism more fully.

When we look at Spartan commemoration and how it changed over time, we discover some surprising things. Despite the Spartans' fearsome reputation, they fought remarkably few wars; and when they did fight, they were not nearly as invincible as their ancient and modern reputation suggests. For some time now, historians have been poking holes in the myth of Spartan invincibility. What no one has noticed until now is that Spartan militarism was kept in check by the very desire for fame and glory that animated soldiers in battle. The intuitive presumption about a society obsessed with military glory is that its members must fight at every opportunity. Late Archaic and Classical Sparta, though, seems to have fought few wars precisely because glory and fame were its only overriding concerns. Other reasons for going to war, such as defending the Greeks from foreign invaders or freeing the oppressed, reasons we might find more palatable today, were not compelling motivations for the Spartans, which kept them out of many military conflicts. Other Greeks, most notably the Athenians, embraced the rhetoric of liberation, of "Greek" versus "barbarian," and thus fought more often, further from home, and for longer periods. When the Spartans eventually embraced these reasons themselves, which their changing commemorative practices reflect, they fought, killed, and died more often, with disastrous consequences for Spartan power. Commemoration provides insight into the reasons why societies fight, and those reasons have a bearing on the likelihood of societies embracing war as a good option.

While the "monument wars" rage concerning the place of Confederate statues and other controversial pieces in contemporary America, and the purpose of commemorative sites and rituals comes into question in many other countries too, it is now time to take a new look at the Spartan commemoration of war, its literary accounts, material monuments, and topographical spaces. Sparta is not only relevant because it was seemingly

more militaristic than other Greek states were. Spartan imagery and Spartan examples frequently have a central place in the activism of various pro-war and anti-immigrant groups in North America and Europe. From at least the 18th century, Sparta has served as a model for a range of movements, from the political philosophy of Rousseau to the lobbying of the National Rifle Association. Let us therefore consider military figures like Brasidas, the model they set for their fellow Spartans, and how that can inform our own ideas about how one generation of warriors passes the torch onto the next, even today.



Map 1 Greece and the Aegean, from S. Pomeroy, S. M. Burstein, W. Donlan, J. T. Roberts, D. Tandy. 2012, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Cultural, and Social History* (3rd edition), Oxford, inside front cover. © Oxford University Press. Reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear.