

Introduction

by John Keegan

This is a fascinating, wholly original, and deeply important book. Before I try to explain why—though any reader, expert or lay, who takes it up will need no explanation of its fascination or importance—let me say how I come to be writing this introduction, which I feel privileged to do. Some five years ago the author, Victor Hanson, whom I then did not know—and we know each other so far only through correspondence—sent me the manuscript of his doctoral thesis, called “Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece.” I, like many established authors, often receive unsolicited manuscripts and find most of them embarrassments. One lacks the time to read them and one lacks the nerve to tell the authors frankly, from such reading as one does, that one’s attention has not been engaged.

Victor Hanson’s manuscript was different. In the first place, it addressed a genuinely interesting question: What was the real extent of that “laying waste” of crops, vines, and fruit-bearing trees so frequently mentioned by ancient historians in their accounts of warfare between the city-states? The question was interesting because the worst damage one city could do to another, after the killing of its citizen-soldiers on the battlefield, was to devastate its agriculture. But in the second place, Victor Hanson advanced a convincing answer to the question he asked. And he was able to do so not only because he was a systematic classical scholar with a sound knowledge of the appropriate texts, but also because he knew about his subject in the best of all ways—the practical way. As the son of a California grape-growing family, he had tended, pruned, and harvested vines.

As a result, he was rightly doubtful of claims that the outcome of this war or that between city-states was to leave the defeated party supine and impoverished. For he knew that the vine is a

sort of weed that flourishes all the more strongly from savage cutting. And, with that in mind, he took the trouble to discover that olives—hard, scrawny, and resistant to flame—defy rapid deforestation. “Devastation,” he concluded, must usually have been quite limited in its effect. A defeated state, though it probably lost its grain crop and so passed a hungry winter, would not have lost its agricultural capital stock—vines and olives—because the vines regenerated in one season; the victors could not, for both economic and military reasons, afford the time necessary to hack down the olive groves to stumps.

Had Victor Hanson left his investigation of the nature of classical warfare there, I think he would still deserve the title of a creative scholar. However, he did not. “Devastation” was not the central act of classical warfare. Battle was. Victor Hanson recognized that, but he found himself dissatisfied—rightly so—by the analysis that modern historians advanced of the nature of battle between the ancients. They told the reader a great deal about the archaeology and iconography of battle—the weapons that excavation has found, the warrior postures that vase paintings depict—but they seemed reluctant to marry artifact with testimony, the testimony of the ancient historians themselves of the battles they had seen and sometimes fought in, to produce a picture of what ancient battle was like and, more important still, what ancient battle was *for*.

Some have proved more than reluctant. Numbers of Victor Hanson’s scholarly colleagues showed themselves downright hostile to the eventual result of his inquiry into the nature of “infantry battle in classical Greece.” They reacted to the chapters he circulated with the judgment that his thesis fell outside the accepted and orthodox reconstructions of Greek warfare; that it ran counter to the theories of scholarly grandees; that it did not abide safely within the confines of archaeology, iconography, and textual exegesis; that it drew upon concepts and ideas from which conventional classical scholarship held itself aloof; and that the publication of his manuscript could, therefore, only harm his professional reputation, perhaps—since he was young

and junior in the academic world—with permanently damaging effect.

A less imaginative writer might have been deterred. Fortunately, Victor Hanson's imagination had led him to perceive that at the root of infantry battle in classical Greece lay the value of personal courage. Courageously, therefore, he set aside the warnings of blinkered and timorous classicists and decided to publish all the same. Elisabeth Sifton, herself a scholar as well as a publisher, needed no persuasion from me, as soon as I asked her to read the manuscript, that it was a work of the highest quality. It is here presented to the general reader—and the specialist—so that they may come to a similar conclusion about its worth.

I delight in Victor Hanson's book for two principal reasons. The first is that it is written with the greatest imagination. That is not to say the picture of Greek warfare he offers is an imaginary one. On the contrary, everything he writes is founded upon strict examination of the evidence—textual, iconographic, or archaeological. But his examination is formed by the same powers of imagination, now focused on the human side of warfare, that in his earlier book he brought from his practical experience as a viniculturist to its material aspects. Thus, while he thinks it important to tell us a great deal about the form and construction of Greek armor, he does not think that form and construction exhaust the subject. As he points out, armor was not a thing in itself; it was an appurtenance of the human body. And there are limits to the weight and discomfort of appurtenances that a human body can bear—limits to be measured not only by the index of immediate physical strength but also by that of stamina and endurance. Thus, for example, when we calculate the weight of a hoplite's shield, we must think of how much muscular effort he had to put forth to support it, and for how long he could sustain that muscular effort. In doing so we begin to be able to estimate the duration of those clashes between phalanxes of hoplites that figure so frequently in the histories of Thucydides and Xenophon. And as soon as we can begin to impose a dimension of time upon the accounts of ancient historians, we prepare

ourselves also to make calculations about the speed at which phalanxes moved, the distances they covered in maneuver, and all the other factors that transform an ancient source from a literary record to a scientific text.

The second reason for which I delight in Victor Hanson's book is that it does not seek merely to define and calibrate the acts of Greek warfare. It goes further, much further. It seeks to show that Greek warfare was different in kind from the warfare that preceded it; that it was different not merely in technique but in ethos; and that its ethos pervaded Greek life, culture, and politics—and thus our own, too. What Hanson suggests—utterly convincingly, to my view—is that the Greeks of the city-states were the first people on earth to contract between themselves, as equals, to fight the enemy shoulder to shoulder, without flinching from wounds, and not to yield the ground on which they fought until either the enemy had broken or they themselves lay dead where they had stood.

Fifth-century Greeks, in short, invented not only the central idea of Western politics—that power in a state should reside in the vote of the majority—but also the central act of Western warfare, the “decisive battle.” For ambush, skirmish, ritual conflict, and single combat between heroes, the types of warfare that had preceded their own—and which M. I. Finley analyzes so brilliantly in *The World of Odysseus*, a book beside which I believe Hanson's will take its place—the Greeks of the city-states substituted the all-or-nothing of pitched battle.

Democracy and pitched battle were, of course, two sides of the same coin. The connection between democracy and the militia principle has long been recognized; it takes little insight to perceive that those who vote for war also commit themselves to fight in it. What had not been perceived, until Victor Hanson lifted the veil, is that the Greek militiamen were also voting for a new kind of warfare dedicated to the same outcome as democratic process—an unequivocal and instantaneous result. Democracy and decisive battle differ, of course, in quality: the first is unviolent, the second unavoidably—and, indeed, necessarily—brutal

and destructive. But the logic of the second resides in the first. A man whose life is rooted in that of his city, his farm, and his family cannot, unlike the footloose and the unpropertied, undertake commitment to an open-ended campaign. Better the risk of death tomorrow, but the chance of a victorious return home the day after, than the interminable, deracinating, and wealth-draining uncertainties of guerrilla warfare. A free man—this is Victor Hanson’s central point—has mortgaged his life to his liberty, and must be ready to risk his life on the battlefield if the mortgage is to be redeemed.

It was the readiness of free Greeks to die on the battlefield that invested their political life with its heroic quality. Victor Hanson’s concluding (and depressing) point is that the modern world retains the ideas both of democracy and of decisive battle, but that while it has not improved upon the former, it has grossly perverted the latter. For the Greeks, battle was a brief and direct encounter between bodies politic, the point of which was to spare families and property from destructive involvement in the brutal decision-making. The modern world, by its efforts to make decisive battle ever more instantaneous in its outcome and conclusive in its result—through the application to warfare of human wealth and ingenuity rather than the commitment of courage and muscular strength—has had exactly the opposite effect. It now demands more of man than any Greek was ever asked to give and threatens the devastation of all he loves and possesses. The Western way of war, conceived by the Greeks as trial by ordeal, leads their descendants into the pit of the holocaust. Victor Hanson’s brilliant and moving meditation on the fatal steps along that path may, let it be hoped, help to draw us back from the brink.