

# THE IMAGE OF WAR IN THE ART OF ANCIENT GREECE

Mateusz ŻMUDZIŃSKI

University of Wrocław

During a large part of the history of Ancient Greece, war was a nearly everyday phenomenon. Actually, every free man was a warrior some time in his lifetime. Even those who had incomes from agriculture or other economic branches took up their weapons, when war came, to defend their homeland or start for a war expedition.

From today's perspective, it can be assumed that periods of peace may seem a bit confusing and unexpected to the Ancient.

From the Bronze Age, for which we lack of precise historical documents, we have a literary description of the yearslasting Trojan War. In much later and better-documented times, countless local wars between the many poleis show up. The aim of the battles was to conquer neighbours, to seize their fields, olive groves and vineyards, to get loot and slaves.

The brave winner did not have to toil in the fields or in the workshop, and after a short battle, he had a chance to become a wealthy stockowner or landowner. The business could be extremely profitable and viable.

On another hand, small and rocky agricultural areas sometimes forced men to lay down their farming tools for a sword and spear. But war was not only the joy of victory and material profits. When there was a winner, there had to be a loser too. Armed confrontations were extremely devastating for entire communities.

Fathers, brothers and sons were killed, whole families suffered. The Niobid Painter showed the death of innocent children who were their mother's joy<sup>1</sup>. Niobe was a mythical character, but real women mourning their children like her certainly never lacked.

Wives became poor widows, often with no security in their old age, children became orphans. Fathers, instead of returning home happily, happened to be carried on their shields almost directly to the funeral pyre<sup>2</sup>.

Who was to give the old parents a piece of bread when the only son lay in the cemetery?

The two successive wars with the Persians are milestones in the history of ancient Greece (Musiał, 1999, p. 282–290). The first one took place in 490 BC, the second in 480–479 BC, the last act of the conflict being played off in 449 BC. These wars for the first time did not raise the Greek warriors against each other, and to some extent united them against a foreign foe. The conflict with the Persians substantially remodelled the Hellenic world. Two main powers, Athens and Sparta, were to emerge afterwards. Their peculiar ambitions and differences in mentality led to quarrels, disputes, and ultimately armed confrontations. Both communities fell into the vortex of bloody armed conflict.

<sup>1</sup> Boardman, 2001, p. 92–93.

<sup>2</sup> Boardman, 2001, p. 182–183.

The Peloponnesian War was an unquestionable disaster, not only for the main stakeholders, but also for their allies. It was the first total war in Greek history<sup>3</sup>. It affected not only the fighters taking part directly in hostilities, but also their families. Cultivated fields were burnt, olive groves happened to be cut down. People died not only on the battlefield but also from hunger, massacres and diseases. The armed conflict lasted so long (431–404 BC) that there was a whole generation of people who were born and died during the war. Greece, exhausted economically and demographically, with time became an easy prey for Macedonia. In the afterwards, under the banner of Alexander the Great, Greeks would move to conquer the world. His expedition took place in the years 336–323 BC. The pretext was to avenge ancient wrongs, but de facto, belligerents were led by the desire of conquest and pillage of the kingdom of Persia. The Macedonian empire was to be ephemeral.

Emerging later Hellenistic monarchies were to fight against each other<sup>4</sup>.

After years, the whole Hellas would be easily conquered by Rome, and the Roman domination would bring the end of the Greek states.

Looking at the different periods of Greek art, it is easy to see that scenes of fighting, or at least, simply warriors are one of the favourite themes<sup>5</sup>. Here I would like to try to show how wars affected the art, and which wars were reflected in it. My aim is not to create a catalogue of all possible images of fights or warriors; it is rather an attempt to establish a correlation between the phenomena and to show up general regularities.

In black-figure pottery painting, we can observe examples of vase decorations showing fighting warriors. These are usually foot soldiers, and they fight with spears. It is difficult to distinguish any form of battle array or fighting principles in these pictures. Sometimes, the scene shows two men in action against one, or two fighters with a slain soldier in the background. Less frequent examples show confrontations between two riders, or between riders and a foot soldier<sup>6</sup>.

Part of the images illustrate mythological conflicts, for example between gods and giants<sup>7</sup>. Artists seemed to be prone to produce pictures of the already semi-mythical Trojan war and its heroes, like Achilles or Hector<sup>8</sup>.

Pictures of fighters still appear in red-figure pottery painting, but usually with some changes. Now the Greeks do not fight any more against each other, as soldiers of antagonistic poleis, but against mythical Amazons wearing long robes, fighting on horseback with spears, axes or bows. There are also scenes of battles against male opponents in very similar foreign robes, which are considered to be Persian. Obviously, it seems that under the appearances of dangerous, mythical Amazons, the artists actually pictured Persians soldiers.

The picture even appears on the shield of Athena Parthenos<sup>9</sup>. Occasionally, too, topics related to the Trojan War continue to appear, including the *Iliupersis*, i.e. the sack of Troy. M. L. Bernhard thinks that *Iliupersis* scenes from the period of the beginning of the Persian wars can be considered rather as a picture of the Persians' atrocities against Greek civilians. They would then represent a punishment sent by fate or the gods for the former acts of savagery committed in Troy, where innocent women, children and elderly were slaughtered.

<sup>3</sup> Musiał 1999, p. 303–323.

<sup>4</sup> Bravo/Wipszycka 1992, p. 39–69, 105, 122, 131–12, 205, 249, 256.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Boardman 1999, p. 94, 117, 204

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Boardman 2001, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> Bernhard 1992, p. 537.

<sup>8</sup> Papuci-Władyka 2001, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> Bernhard 1991, p. 334–337.

Examples of such works were painted by the Kleophrades Painter<sup>10</sup>. Persian wars brought not only the joy of victory, but victims and destruction. Duris painted Eos raising the body of Memnon, i.e. a mother mourning her slain son. It is hard to imagine such decorations on ordinary table dishes. Such cups probably were used to raise toasts to fallen warriors during funeral ceremonies. Similar pictures can be found in the reliefs decorating Greek temples.

The pediment of the Aphaia temple (about 480 BC) in Aegina shows Greeks fighting Trojans. A frieze which was executed and placed there about 465–456 BC shows a fight against Amazons. Decorations of the Parthenon of Athens also show a scene of *Iliupersis*. A frieze of the temple of Athena Nike (about 420 BC), in Athens, directly presents – which is exceptional – the battle of Platea or Marathon. Searchers see in it a picture not of the legendary Amazons, but of the Persians. The western and northern friezes of the temple of Athena Nike can yet be linked with the Peloponnesian War and refer to fights between Athenians and Spartans. In the decorations of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (about 350 BC), artists immortalized again the mythical battle between Greeks and Amazons<sup>11</sup>.

The monument is very unusual as it is the tomb of a Persian satrap which decorations are the work of Greek artists. They took into account the tastes of both the Persians – among whom Mausolus himself – and the Greeks, and the Amazons shown in the reliefs do not appear to be easy opponents.

The subject of the Greeks fighting the Persians comes again on the so-called Alexander sarcophagus, which dates back to about 312–310 BC and would show recent battles of the times of Alexander the Great<sup>12</sup>. The issue of hiding wars in official art, i.e. in the reliefs that decorated temples and other public buildings, is most interesting. Under the cover of mythical fights, in the Amazonomachies (battles against Amazons), Gigantomachies (gods fighting Giants) and Centauromachies (fights against Centaurs), the artists could show fights against real enemies<sup>13</sup>.

This allowed not to show the enemy in a place which was sacred for the community, and at the same time – by political correctness, as we could say today – to avoid further conflicts. Placing such reliefs in places frequented by citizens of different poleis did not arise controversy, because none of the children of the defeated would see anything offensive in the pictures of mythological characters. The despair, death, suffering or humiliation of a Giant, a Centaur or an Amazon did not offend the pride of any warrior. But there was no mystery around the circumstances and events that had led to the birth of these works of art.

The Altar of Zeus and Athena at Pergamon is a good example<sup>14</sup>. In archaic art, the motif of the fight against the Amazons is not so frequent. It can be seen in the temple of Apollo at Eretria. The Classical period, after the Persian wars, brings a profusion of such pictures, for example at the Temple of Apollo in Bassae, on the shield of Athena Parthenos, on the frieze of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus.

For the Hellenistic period, the frieze of the temple of Artemis Leukophryene in Magnesia can be given as example. The motif also appears on Greek sarcophagi. Similarly, in the fifth century BC, after the Persian wars, Centauromachies – mythical battle of the Lapiths against the Centaurs – become widespread. As examples, we may mention the scenery of the western pediment of the temple of Zeus at Olympia, the western frieze of the temple of Apollo in Bassae,

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard, 1991, p. 173–5.

<sup>11</sup> Bernhard 1992, p. 381–407.

<sup>12</sup> Havelock 1972, p. 191–192.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bernhard 1991, p. 256.

<sup>14</sup> Bernhard 1993, p. 298–322; Pollit 1986, p. 86–110.

metopes of the southern frieze of the Parthenon, or the western frieze of the Hephaisteion in Athens.

For the Archaic period, we have pictures of fights against Giants on the pediment of the treasury of the Megarians in Olympia (about 510–500 BC), the pediments of the temples of Artemis in Corfu and the old temple of Athena on the Acropolis, and in the northern frieze of the Treasury of the Siphnians at Delphi. There are much less pictures from the Classical period, with for example the decoration of the metopes of the eastern frieze of the Parthenon, in Athens. For the Hellenistic period, the most remarkable work is the frieze of the Altar of Zeus and Athena from Pergamon.

The Hellenistic period is also characterized by the construction of victory monuments, like the Nike of Samothrace, the Colossus of Rhodes and the very interesting group of sculptures depicting the victory of Pergamon over the Gauls<sup>15</sup>.

In Pergamon, which is quite remarkable, the artists did not show the winners, but well built and brave, though defeated and dying, enemies<sup>16</sup>.

A Gaul prefers to kill his wife himself and commit suicide rather than being caught in slavery<sup>17</sup>. This new way of showing victory is quite exceptional from the propaganda point of view. In later times, similar artistic ideas will seldom appear. In their historical reliefs, the Romans will rather focus on the victors and avoid exhibiting the bravery of the defeated barbarians. Modern artists will rather follow the Roman writers, who were not concerned about any political correctness and did not care about the feelings of the grandchildren of the vanquished.

In summary, we can see that during the archaic period, Greek art was prone to portray brave warriors. Artists often depicted war actions by hiding them under the appearances of Trojan War heroes. A breakthrough seems to have come with the wars of the Greeks against the Persians, where the citizens of different cities were now fighting together against a common enemy, the Persians. These were sometimes portrayed as foreigners, directly recognizable by their weapons, but more often under the appearance of Amazons. Similarly, fights against fierce Centaurs were often pictured in this period. The long-lasting and devastating Peloponnesian war was reflected on monuments showing the struggle between the Athenians and the Spartans, or showing the sufferings of war.

Eos with the body of Memnon and the Niobids may be shown as examples of victims of the struggle between the Greeks themselves. In Hellenistic times, mythical battles like the Amazonomachies or Centauromachies continued to be common themes for the artists. But there were also monuments directly bearing witness to the battles of the wars against the Persians or the Gauls.

As outlined above, the art of the ancient Greeks shows the complexity of their world, including the recurring presence of war in their lives. Armed conflicts left deep scars on entire communities, which is still noticeable today in many paintings, sculptures and reliefs. There was no age without great winners, and thus without the usually forgotten defeated, widows and orphans.

## Bibliography

Bernhard 1991

= M.L. Bernhard, *Sztukagrecka V wiek u.p.n.e.. Historiasztukigreckiej*, v. II, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Pollit 1986, p. 115 *et al.*

<sup>16</sup> Pollit 1986, p. 86–90.

<sup>17</sup> Bernhard 1993, p. 255–264.

- Bernhard 1992 = M.L. Bernhard, *Sztukagrecka IV wiekup.n.e., Historiastarożytnesztukigreckiejv. III*, WydawnictwoNaukowe PWN, Warszawa 1992.
- Bernhard 1993 = M.L. Bernhard, *Sztukahellenistyczna, Historiasztukigreckiej v. IV*, WydawnictwoNaukowe PWN, Warszawa 1993.
- Boardman 1999 = J. Boardman, *Sztukagrecka*, Wydawnictwo VIA, Toruń, Wrocław 1999.
- Boardman 2001 = Boardman *The History of Greek Vases. Potters, Paiters and Pictures*. Thames and Hudson Ltd, London 2001
- Bravo/Wipszycka 1992 = B. Bravo, E.Wipszycka, *HistoriastarożytnychGreków, v. III, Okreshellenistyczny*, WydawnictwoNaukowe PWN, Warszawa 1992
- Musiał 1999 = D. MusiałGrecja[in:]M. Jaczynowska, D. Musiał, M. Stępień, *Historiastarożytna*,ed. M. Jaczynowska, Wydawnictwo Trio,Pułtusk 1999, p. 233–407.
- Havelock 1972 = C.M. Havelock, *Sztukahellenistyczna. Sztukaświatastarożytnegoodśmierci Aleksandra Wielkiego do bitwy pod Akcjum*, Arkady, Warszawa 1972
- Papuci/Władyka 2001 = E. Papuci-Władyka, *SztukastarożytnejGrecji*, WydawnictwoNaukowe PWN SA, Kraków 2001
- Pollit 1986 = J.J. Pollit, *Art. in Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1986.
- Stansbury O'Donnell 2014 = M.D. Sansbury O'Donnell, *Looking at Greek Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

## IMAGINEA RĂZBOIULUI ÎN ARTA GREACĂ ANTICĂ

(Abstract)

This article deals with the image of ancient wars in Greek art. War is shown in vase paintings, sculptures and reliefs. Initially, the pictures were related to the Trojan War and the Amazons. But the presentation of the conflicts was also often hidden in the form of Centauromachies and Gigantomachies. With the Persian wars, isolated pictures of real battles appeared. The period of the Peloponnesian War left behind traces of tragic events, images of suffering and death. The Hellenistic period, with its many large-scale wars, left behind both new ways of presenting enemies and monumental victory monuments, as well as the pathos and violence of the feelings linked with the experience of the belligerents.