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The Coverage of Wartime Rape in Greek Historiography

Greek historiography is of considerable relevance for comprehending the Western roots and persistent practice of subjecting women and girls through wartime rape and captivity. Though the Fourth Geneva Convention in 1949 has helped revolutionize the laws of war in Western culture and beyond by declaring that “women shall be especially protected ... against rape” during war and its aftermath, this international law has since been violated many times by bands of armed men, such as in the former Yugoslavia. The practice of killing ‘enemy’ males and abducting and raping their ‘alien’ women has deep roots in Western culture. It is of compelling scholarly and humanitarian interest to better understand its basis in antiquity, where conquerors regarded it as their time-honored right to target male hostiles primarily for killing and females primarily for rape, captivity, forced impregnation, and slavery.

Extending Pritchett’s pioneering study of captives and booty, I demonstrate how the narrative conventions of Greek historiography downplay the significant military practice of taking females as captives. Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and sources on Alexander are, with rare exception, terse or oblique about this fundamental aspect of predatory and retaliatory warfare, while they narrate in full the man-to-man aspect of Greek or Macedonian warriors attacking local fighters (often of another ethnicity), who struggled, in turn, to protect their community from being ravaged. This discrepancy has overly stressed the historical role of males in such warfare, and has diminished our awareness of females as the targets to subjugate through aggravated sexual assault and other brutal treatment.

Interesting rules of historiographical decorum underlie the discrepancy. For example, Polybius notes that the respectable historian must not be “base and womanly” in his war narratives. To narrate sieges in a manner evocative of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* was to succumb to this perceived vice. Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, and sources on Alexander nonetheless do indicate occasionally that the forcible acquisition of women and girls was central to the very goals of much Greco-Macedonian warfare, not an ancillary by-product. This fact needs to be brought much more to the fore in our understanding of, for instance, intermarriage, ethnic mixing, and the reproduction of bastard sons in Greek and Macedonian homelands and colonies.

Further, in light of the above findings, evidence from contemporary societies beleaguered by wartime rape would indicate that the misogyny expressed in numerous ancient Greek sources was probably not a timeless given of a Greek male way of thinking. Rather, such hostility was almost certainly a historically grounded accomplice to the longstanding military practice of subjugating and devaluing females through predatory and retaliatory warfare.