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Caesar in Vietnam: Did Roman Soldiers Suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

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CAESAR IN VIETNAM: DID ROMAN SOLDIERS SUFFER FROM POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?*

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) made its first appearance in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980, partly as a result of the ongoing treatment of veterans from the Vietnam War.¹ Although PTSD is not only or even primarily a disorder caused by combat, combat is a regular trigger and my chief concern in what follows.² Therefore I will not be examining such evidence as exists for the psychological traumas of civilians in the ancient world who were exposed to violence, rape, enslavement, or the execution of family members in the context of conquest.³ My focus is on the soldier.

The importance of whether PTSD affected the ancient Romans lies in the larger historical question of to what extent we can apply modern experience to unlock or interpret the past. In the period since PTSD was officially recognized, scholars and psychologists have noted its symptoms in descriptions of the veterans of past conflicts, including the American Civil War.⁴ Of late, it has become increasingly common to run across articles and books that assume the direct relevance of present-day psychology to the reactions of those who experienced

*I would like to thank both the editor and my reviewer, who was generous with his knowledge and expertise. All opinions and any errors are my own.

¹ For the historical background of the term, see B. Shephard, *A War of Nerves. Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); a brief overview is also provided by G. C. Lasiuk and K. M. Hegadoren, 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Part I: Historical Development of the Concept', *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care*, 42 (February 2006), 13–20.

² Although Combat Stress Reaction (CSR) or Combat Stress Injury (CSI) is preferable because the terms specify the triggering event, I have chosen to use the term PTSD because of its regular usage in the public arena to refer to combat stress.

³ While we know that such events regularly occurred in the ancient world, it is interesting to note that the historians rarely describe them. Most discussions of the suffering of women occur in the context of tragedy. See E. O'Gorman, 'A Woman's History of Warfare', in V. Zajko and M. Leonard (eds.), *Laughing with Medusa. Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford, 2006), 189–207.

⁴ See for example J. Talbott, 'Combat Trauma in the American Civil War', *History Today* 46.3 (1996), 41–48; E. Dean, *Shook Over Hell. Post-traumatic Stress, Vietnam, and the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA, 1997). Both offer a number of nuanced readings, but examples in these and other works by classicists and ancient historians are frequently repeated without context or citation – e.g. P. Birmes, L. Hatton, A. Brunet, and L. Schmitt, 'Early Historical Literature for Post-traumatic Symptomatology', *Stress and Health* 19 (2003), 18–21.

violent events in the historical past.⁵ There is perhaps no better way to show how prevalent this view has become than to quote from the e-medicine site: ‘Wars throughout the ages often triggered what some people called “shell shock” in which returning soldiers were unable to adapt to life after war’.⁶ In print and televised media, claims for the historical pedigree of PTSD are now often provided as background to the modern story, without attribution. Examples include a narrator’s voiceover in an episode of the documentary show *Frontline* aired on the Public Broadcasting Service in the United States: ‘In the Civil War, soldiers who showed signs of such a disorder were said to have “nostalgia” or be suffering from “soldier’s heart”. In World War I, the condition was called “shell shock”, in World War II, “battle fatigue”.’⁷ A similar list of terms is provided in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation news piece that begins: ‘Incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder have been documented as far back as ancient Greece.’⁸ And a recent lecture delivered by Dr Edward Tick, the author of *War and the Soul. Healing Our Nation’s Veterans from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*, included the comment, ‘We can read descriptions of people with PTSD in the bible, ancient Greek and Roman literature and those PTSD sufferers look just like ours.’⁹

My goal here is to consider some of the more recent developments in the research on PTSD and how they intersect with what classicists

⁵ The following list is representative: J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York, 1994); idem, *Odysseus in America* (New York, 2002); L. Trittle, *From Melos to My Lai* (Routledge, 2000); F. P. Retief and L. Cilliers, ‘The Army of Alexander the Great and Combat Stress Syndrome (326 BC)’, *Acta Theologica* 26.2 (2005), 29–43; P. A. Mackowiak and S. V. Batten, ‘Post-traumatic Stress Reactions before the Advent of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: Potential Effects on the Lives and Legacies of Alexander the Great, Captain James Cook, Emily Dickinson, and Florence Nightingale’, *Military Medicine* 173 (December 2008), 1158–63; J. Toner, *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome* (Malden, MA, 2009), 64–5; J. Talbott, ‘Soldiers, Psychiatrists, and Combat Trauma’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27 (1997), 437–8; L. A. Struve, ‘Confucian PTSD: Reading Trauma in a Chinese Youngster’s Memoir of 1653’, *History and Memory* 16.2 (2004), 14–31. A number of the pieces in M. B. Cosmopoulos (ed.), *Experiencing War. Trauma and Society in Ancient Greece and Today* (Chicago, IL, 2007) also suggest this view.

⁶ <http://www.emedicinehealth.com/post-traumatic_stress_disorder_ptsd/article_em.htm> accessed 21 July 2010.

⁷ R. Aronson (writer, producer, director), ‘The Soldier’s Heart’, *Frontline* documentary on PBS, <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heart/etc/script.html>>, accessed 25 March 2011. For a challenge to the conflation of these conditions, see E. Jones and S. Wesseley, ‘War Syndromes: The Impact of Culture on Medically Unexplained Symptoms’, *Medical History* 49 (2005), 55–78.

⁸ CBC News, ‘The Traumatic Effects of Extreme Stress’, <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/health/story/2008/12/17/f-ptsd.html>> accessed 25 March 2011.

⁹ K. W. Norman, ‘Altus AFB Gets New Perspective About PTSD’, *Altus Air Force Base Military News* (March 2011), <<http://www.altus.af.mil/news/story.asp?id=123246685>>, accessed 25 March 2011.

do when we reconstruct or reimagine the past. This is not an article on the Roman military or the Roman way of war. The examples drawn from the *corpus Caesarianum* are illustrative rather than exhaustive, and were chosen because they were written by authors who had close involvement with or knowledge of the violence that they described. It has long been customary for the West to map the classical world upon the present. My question is whether we can so easily map the modern world back upon the Romans. My analysis is presented in two halves. First, I will explore some of the ways that scholars have arrived at the view that the Greeks and Romans did suffer something akin to PTSD. And second, I will present some of the problems with the two presuppositions that make this view so attractive: that there were similar stressors two thousand years ago to those that exist currently, and that the psychological makeup of the men who fought then was similar enough to that of modern men to make them react similarly to comparable causal stimuli.

Descriptions of veterans are rare in the writings that survive from the Roman world and occur most often in fiction. In the first poem of Ovid's *Heroides*, the poet writes about a returned soldier tracing a map upon a table (Ov. *Her.* 1.31–5):

...upon the tabletop that has been set someone shows the fierce battles,
and paints all Troy with a slender line of pure wine:
'Here the Simois flowed; this is the Sigeian territory,
here stood the lofty palace of old Priam,
there the tent of Achilles...'

This scene provides an intimate glimpse of what it must have been like when a veteran returned home and told stories of his campaigns: the memories of battle brought to the meal, the crimson trail of the wine offering a rough outline of the places and battlefields he had experienced.¹⁰ The military characters in poems and plays show a world in which soldiers are ubiquitous, if somewhat annoying to the civilians. Plautus, for instance, in his *Miles Gloriosus*, portrays an officer boasting about his made-up conquests – the model for the braggart in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* – and Juvenal

¹⁰ Ovid imports verisimilitude into the Homeric scene by offering a modern touch. For another poetic expression of war intersecting with home life, see Propertius (4.3.35–40), where a young wife consults a map to trace the progress of her husband's campaigning.

complains about a centurion who stomps on his sandalled foot in the bustling Roman street.¹¹

Outside the fictional world, the Roman military man is described almost exclusively as a commander or in battle. Men such as Caesar who experienced war and wrote about it do not tell us about homecoming. Greek writers do; the return from war was a revisited theme in tragedy and is the subject of the *Odyssey* and the Cyclic *Nostoi*.¹² But, with rare exceptions, the works from Graeco-Roman antiquity do not discuss the mental state of those who had fought. There is silence about the interior world of the fighting man at war's end. Such silence has drawn my attention because with modern warfare has come a malady that is newly named but possibly old: post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite this silence, compelling works have been written that interweave vivid modern accounts of combat and its aftermath with quotes from ancient prose and poetry. At their best, these comparisons can illuminate both worlds, but at other times the concerns of the present-day author are imposed on the ancient material. Although much ink has been spilt and many examples adduced,¹³ definitive evidence for the existence of PTSD in the ancient world does not exist, and relies instead upon the assumption that the Romans, because they were exposed to combat so often, must have suffered psychological trauma.¹⁴

We know that exposure to violence occurred. And we know, too, that homecoming was a common experience, in that some type of military service was a regular feature of the *cursus honorum* for those in the senatorial class and was an avenue for the lower classes seeking advancement.¹⁵ Valour in combat was respected, and it was not

¹¹ For a darker and less benign representation of the interaction between citizens and soldiers in fiction, see Apul. *Met.* 9.39–42, in which a citizen beats a soldier who attempts to requisition his mule and is later found by the soldier's comrades and executed.

¹² This was recently the subject of a conference entitled 'Nostos: War, the *Odyssey*, and Narratives of Return', held in Columbia, South Carolina, 24–7 March 2011, and featuring, among other plenary speakers, Jonathan Shay.

¹³ In addition to Achilles and Odysseus in epic, the most cited examples from tragedy are Sophocles' Ajax and Euripides' Heracles, and, in prose, the sudden blindness of Epizelus at the battle of Marathon (Hdt. 6.117).

¹⁴ The reasoning underlying this view is summarized by S. Chrissanthos, 'Aeneas in Iraq: Comparing the Roman and Modern Battle Experience', in Cosmopoulos (n. 5), 225: 'when some human beings are subjected to extremely difficult living conditions and the trauma of combat, certain responses are "predictable" due to "biochemical and physiological" factors. Time and place are of less significance than these constant factors' (the embedded quotes are from Tritle [n. 5], 8).

¹⁵ G. Wesch-Klein, 'Recruits and Veterans', in P. Erdkamp (ed.), *A Companion to the Roman Army* (Oxford, 2007), 435–50.

unusual, when in pursuit of higher office or defending oneself at trial, to display the scars from battle as a physical witness of character.¹⁶ Inscriptions inform us that many veterans pursued successful careers upon their return, becoming leading men in their cities.¹⁷ We know that they feared war and respected it, we know that they used ritual to distinguish war from peace, but we do not know how these men fared emotionally and psychologically after long exposure to violence.

I

So how have we arrived at the view that the Romans experienced PTSD? One avenue has been the comparative nature of military history. The origin of military history was tied to the idea that if one understood ancient battle, one might fight and, more importantly, one might lead and strategize more effectively. In essence, much of the training of officers – even in the military handbooks of the Greeks and Romans – was an attempt to keep new commanders from making the same mistakes as the commanders of old.¹⁸ Military history is intended to be a pragmatic enterprise; in pursuit of this pragmatic goal, it has long been the norm to use comparative materials to understand the nature of ancient battle. The nineteenth-century military theorist Ardant du Picq argued for the continuity of human behaviour and assumed that the reactions of men under the threat of lethal force would be identical over the centuries.

Man does not enter battle to fight, but for victory. He does everything that he can to avoid the first and obtain the second...Now, man has a horror of death. In the bravest, a great sense of duty, which they alone are capable of understanding and living up to, is paramount. But the mass always cowers at sight of the phantom, death. Discipline is for the purpose of dominating that horror by a still greater horror, that of punishment or disgrace. But there always comes an instant when natural horror gets an upper hand over discipline, and the fighter flees.¹⁹

These words offer insight to those of us who have never faced the terror of battle but at the same time assume the universality of how

¹⁶ M. Leigh, 'Wounding and Popular Rhetoric at Rome', *BICS* 40 (1995), 195–212.

¹⁷ For inscriptional evidence from the colonies, see L. Keppie, *Legions and Veterans* (Stuttgart, 2000).

¹⁸ For the use of such handbooks in the ancient world, see B. Campbell, 'How to Be a General', *JRS* 77 (1987), 13–29.

¹⁹ A. du Picq, *Battle Studies*, trans. J. Greeley and R. Cotton (Boston, MA, 2000), 38.

combat is experienced, despite changes in psychological expectations and weaponry, to name but two variables.

Another incentive for scholars to turn to comparative material has been the growing awareness of the artificiality of how we describe war. A mere phrase such as ‘flank attack’ does not capture the bloody, grinding human struggle.²⁰ Roman authors – especially those who had not fought – often wrote generic descriptions of battle. Literary battle can distort and simplify even as it tells, but if the main things are right – who won, who lost, and who the good guys are – the important ‘facts’ are covered.²¹ Even if one intends to speak the truth about battle, the assumptions and the normative language used to describe violence will affect the telling.²² We may note that battle accounts in poetry become increasingly grisly during the course of the Roman Empire (perhaps owing to the growing popularity of gladiatorial games),²³ while, in Caesar’s *Gallic War*, the Latin word *cruor* (blood) never appears and *sanguis* (another Latin word for blood) only appears in quoted appeals (Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.20, in the mouth of Vercingetorix, and 7.50, where the centurion M. Petronius urges his men to retreat). The realities of the battlefield are described in anodyne shorthand. In much the same way that the news rarely prints or televises graphic images, Caesar does not use gore, and perhaps for the same reason – to give a sense of reportorial objectivity.

Another element in the interpretive scrum is a given author’s goal in writing an account in the first place: Caesar, for example, was writing about himself, and he may have been producing something akin to a campaign ad.²⁴ Caesar makes Caesar look great and there is reason to believe that, if he was not precisely cooking the books, he gave them a quick blanch.²⁵ Given the many factors that complicate our ability to

²⁰ For the artificiality of the idiom in which Caesar describes battle, see J. E. Lendon, ‘The Rhetoric of Combat: Greek Theory and Roman Culture in Julius Caesar’s Battle Descriptions’, *CA* 18 (1999), 273–329.

²¹ J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York, 1976), 63–65; A. J. Woodman, ‘Introduction: The Literature of War’, in *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford, 1998).

²² Lendon (n. 20) 277: ‘However accurately a historian represents a battle...all battle descriptions are works of artistry. Caesar’s battle descriptions are not works of fiction, but attempts to reduce the chaos of reality to understandable narrative.... For this he necessarily relies upon preconceived models for interpreting his and his army’s experience of combat.’

²³ G. W. Most, ‘*Disiecta Membra Poetae*: The Rhetoric of Dismemberment in Neronian Poetry’, in R. Hexter and D. Selden (eds.), *Innovations of Antiquity* (New York, 1992), 391–419.

²⁴ T. P. Wiseman, ‘The Publication of *De Bello Gallico*’, in A. Powell and K. Welch (eds.), *Caesar as Artful Reporter* (London, 1999), 3–6.

²⁵ A. Goldsworthy, ‘“Instinctive Genius”: The Depiction of Caesar the General’, in Powell and Welch (n. 24), 193–212; J. Collins, ‘Caesar as Political Propagandist’, *ANRW* 1 (1972), 922–66.

‘unpack’ battle narratives, Philip Sabin has argued that the ambiguity and unreliability of the ancient sources must be supplemented by looking at the ‘form of the overall characteristics of Roman infantry engagements and the enduring psychological strains upon men in mortal combat’.²⁶ Again, the modern is used to illuminate that which is obscured by our written accounts and ‘the enduring psychological strains’ are assumed.²⁷

These legitimate uses of comparative material have led to a sort of creep: because military historians have used observations of how men react to combat stress *during* battle to indicate continuity of behaviour through time, there appears to be a consequent expectation that men will also react identically *after* battle. This creep became a lusty stride with the work of Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist in Boston. He began reading *The Iliad* with Vietnam veterans whom he was treating. His first book, *Achilles in Vietnam*, is a deeply humane work and is very much concerned with promoting policies that he hoped would help diminish the frequency of post-traumatic stress. His goal was not to explain ancient poetry but to use it therapeutically by linking his patients’ pain to that of the *Iliad*’s great hero. His book offers a conduit between the reader and the experiences of the men that Shay counsels. In the introduction to this work he makes a nod to Homerists while also asserting the primacy of his own reading:

I shall present the *Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles. I will not glorify Vietnam combat veterans by linking them to a prestigious ‘classic’ nor attempt to justify study of the *Iliad* by making it sexy, exciting, modern or ‘relevant’. I respect the work of classical scholars and could not have done my work without them. Homer’s poem does not mean whatever I want it to mean. However, having honored the boundaries of meaning that scholars have pointed out, I can confidently tell you that my reading of the *Iliad* as an account of men in war is not a ‘meditation’ that is only tenuously rooted in the text.²⁸

After outlining the major plot points around which he will organize his argument, he notes, ‘This *is* the story of Achilles in the *Iliad*, not some metaphoric translation of it’.²⁹ Subsequently, a number of scholars have commented on PTSD in the ancient world with some variation of the following: ‘The work of Jonathan Shay and Larry Tritle has

²⁶ P. Sabin, ‘The Face of Roman Battle,’ *JRS* 90 (2000), 15.

²⁷ Others who take this approach include R. MacMullen, ‘The Legion as a Society,’ *Historia* 33 (1984), 440–56.

²⁸ Shay (n. 5), 1994, xx.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

demonstrated that the psychological realities of western warfare are universal and enduring...'.³⁰

This brings us to Lawrence Tritle, a veteran himself, who in his book *From Melos to My Lai*, draws direct parallels between the experiences of the ancient Greeks and those of modern veterans. For instance, Xenophon, in his military autobiography, presents a brief eulogy for one of his fallen commanders, Clearchus. Xenophon writes that Clearchus was '*polemikos kai philopolemos eschatos*' (Xen. *An.* 2.6) – 'warlike and a lover of war to the highest degree'. Tritle comments:

The question that arises is why men like Clearchus and his counterparts in Vietnam and the Western Front became so entranced with violence. The answer is to be found in the natural 'high' that violence induces in those exposed to it, and in the PTSD that follows this exposure. Such a modern interpretation in Clearchus' case might seem forced, but there seems little reason to doubt that Xenophon in fact provides us with the first known historical case of PTSD in the western literary tradition.³¹

But, while modern Americans might view the term 'war-lover' as problematic, such an interpretation speaks more of our ambivalence towards war; to the Spartans and Athenians the term would not have had a negative connotation. 'Philopolemos' is, in fact, a compliment, and the list of Clearchus' military exploits functions as a eulogy. As one reviewer of Tritle's book noted, 'There are...points where his analysis does not adequately address the divergences between ancient and modern experiences'.³²

³⁰ T. Palaima, 'Civilian Knowledge of War and Violence in Ancient Athens and Modern America', in Cosmopoulos (n. 5), 10. Consider also, Brian Derries, the theatre director of the 'Philoctetes Project', which stages ancient drama for veterans, who claims that 'Ancient Greek drama was a form of story-telling and therapy for war veterans by war veterans...we think these plays were a way to reintegrate soldiers back into society' (C. Haberman, 'Like War Itself, Effects of War Are Hell. Ask the Greeks', *New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/19/nyregion/19nyc.html?scp=4&sq=doerries&st=cse>>, accessed 21 July 2010; the theatre project is discussed at its website: <<http://philoctetesproject.org/about.html>>, accessed 13 May 2011); c.f. R. E. Meagher, *Herakles Gone Mad. Rethinking Heroism in an Age of Endless War* (Northampton, MA, 2006), 13–25. There has been a trend from noting the similarity of symptoms to using PTSD to explain past events. The problem is the post hoc nature of the argument. Did the prevalence of combat trauma lead to the Treaty of Versailles or the Marshall Plan? If both, then the explanatory value is limited.

³¹ Tritle, (n. 5), 56.

³² J. W. I. Lee, *BMCR* of Tritle, *From Melos to My Lai*, <<http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2001/2001-03-03.html>>, accessed 21 July 2010.

II

A complicating factor in determining whether the Romans experienced PTSD is that the diagnosis and specific triggers of the disorder are not fully understood.³³ There are competing theories about what causes PTSD but, in terms of experiences that make it manifest, there are essentially three possible triggers: witnessing horrific events and/or being in mortal danger and/or the act of killing – especially close kills where the reality of one’s responsibility cannot be doubted.³⁴ The last of these was strongly argued in Grossman’s book, *On Killing*.³⁵

Roman soldiers had the potential to experience all of these things. The majority of Roman combat was close combat and permitted no doubt as to the killer. The comparatively short length of the *gladius* encouraged aggressive fighting. Caesar recounts how his men, facing a shield wall carried by the taller Gauls, leaped up on top of the shields, grabbed the upper edges with one hand, and stabbed downwards into the faces of their opponents (Caes. *B. Gall.* 1.52). As for mortal danger, Stefan Chrissanthos puts it this way:

For Roman soldiers, though the weapons were more primitive, the terrors and risks of combat were just as real. They had to face javelins, stones, spears, arrows, swords, cavalry charges, and maybe worst of all, the threat of being trampled by war elephants.³⁶

Such terrors are regularly attested. During his campaign in North Africa, Caesar, noting his men’s fear, procured a number of elephants

³³ Dean (n. 4), 194–208 contains a good summary of some of the problems of defining PTSD, including factors such as comorbidity, social context, and the politicized use of veterans. A. Young, *Harmony of Illusions. Inventing Post-traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ, 1995) dismisses the notion that PTSD is a universal phenomenon and argues that it is the product of our culture and modern notions of memory, narrative, and clinical processes of diagnostic definition and treatment.

³⁴ The diagnostic criteria A from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) IV (Washington, DC, 1994) are: ‘The person experiences a traumatic event in which both of the following were present: 1. the person experienced or witnessed or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others; 2. the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.’ DSM-V is scheduled to be published in 2012 and there is ongoing debate concerning whether these criteria should be retained or modified.

³⁵ See D. Grossman, *On Killing. The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, MA, 1995). His work owes much to ethology and particularly the work of Konrad Lorenz. The trauma of ‘close kills’ has since become the focus of work by S. Maguen, ‘The Impact of Reported Direct and Indirect Killing on Mental Health Symptoms in Iraq War Veterans’, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23 (2010), 86–90; eadem, ‘The Impact of Killing in War on Mental Health Symptoms and Related Functioning’, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 22 (2009), 435–43.

³⁶ Chrissanthos (n. 14), 232.

to familiarize his troops with how best to kill the beasts (Caes. *B. Afr.* 72).³⁷ And a final point: it was not unusual for the reserve line to be made up of veterans because they were better able to watch the combat without losing their nerve. Held in reserve, they had to watch stoically as their comrades were injured and killed, and contemplate the awful fact that they might suffer the same fate. This was not a role for the faint of heart.

However, while the Romans certainly had the raw ingredients for combat trauma, the danger for a Roman legionary was much more localized.³⁸ Mortars could not be lobbed into the Green Zone, suicide bombers did not walk into the market, and garbage piled on the street did not hide powerful explosives. The danger for a Roman soldier was largely circumscribed by his moments on the field of battle,³⁹ and even here, if he was with the victorious side, the casualties were likely to be light: at Gergovia, a disaster by Caesar's standards, he lost nearly seven hundred men (Caes. *B. Gall.* 7.51). In his victory over Pompey the Great at Pharsalus, his casualties numbered only two hundred (Caes. *B. Civ.* 3.99).

So were the stressors really the same? This article has been stimulated in part by the publication of a new study concerning the effects of concussive injuries upon troops after their return from active duty in Iraq.⁴⁰ The study followed 2,525 soldiers and questioned them three to four months after their return from a year-long deployment. The results were startling. Of the majority of soldiers who suffered no combat injuries of any sort, 9.1 per cent exhibited symptoms consistent with PTSD. This allows a baseline for susceptibility of roughly 10 per cent of the population.⁴¹ A slightly higher number (16.2 per cent) of those who were injured in some way, but suffered no concussion, also experienced symptoms. As soon as concussive injuries were involved, however, the rates of PTSD climbed dramatically. Although

³⁷ See also the scene in which the narrator notes a soldier's bravery in taking on an elephant (Caes. *B. Afr.* 84).

³⁸ A. Goldsworthy, *The Roman Army at War 100 BC–AD 200* (Oxford, 1996), 224–6; Sabin (n. 26), 10–11.

³⁹ Troops might suffer ambush on the march or harassment when foraging but once inside a well-built camp they were relatively safe, as Caesar's discussion of Quintus Cicero's camp in book five of his *Bellum Gallicum* makes clear.

⁴⁰ C. W. Hoge et al., 'Mild Traumatic Brain Injury in U.S. Soldiers Returning from Iraq', *New England Journal of Medicine* 358 (2008), 453–63, <<http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/full/NEJMoa072972>> accessed 21 July 2010.

⁴¹ C. B. Nemeroff et al., 'Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A State-of-the-science Review', *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 40 (2006), 1–21.

only 4.9 per cent of the troops suffered concussions that resulted in complete loss of consciousness, 43.9 per cent of these soldiers noted on their questionnaires that they were experiencing a range of PTSD symptoms. Of the 10.3 per cent of the unit who suffered concussion resulting in confusion but retained consciousness, more than a quarter (27.3 per cent) suffered symptoms. This suggests a high correlation between head trauma and the occurrence of subsequent psychological problems.⁴² The authors of the study note that ‘concern has been emerging about the possible long term effect of mild traumatic brain injury or concussion...as a result of deployment related head injuries, particularly those resulting from proximity to blast explosions’.⁴³

Although these results are preliminary, if confirmed they have profound implications for those of us who study combat in the past. In Roman warfare, wounds were most often inflicted by edged weapons. Romans did of course experience head trauma, but the incidence of concussive injuries would have been limited both by the types of weapons they faced and by the use of helmets.⁴⁴ While the evidence is clear that concussion is not the only risk factor for PTSD, it is so strongly correlated that it suggests that the incidence of PTSD may have risen sharply with the arrival of modern warfare and the technology of gunpowder, shells, and plastic explosives. Indeed, accounts of shell shock from the First World War are common, and it was in the wake of that war that those observing veterans suspected that neurological damage was being caused by exploding shells.⁴⁵

⁴² Owing to the high comorbidity rate, there is ongoing debate in the United States concerning the definition and treatment of both brain injury and PTSD. The difficulty is with the diagnosis of PTSD in the first place: psychology is just starting to develop from diagnoses based upon a preponderance of symptoms to the use of imaging and chemical analysis as new technological advancements allow us to look inside the head. For a discussion of some of the problems defining PTSD, see G. C. Lasiuk et al., ‘Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Part II: Development of the Construct Within the North American Psychiatric Taxonomy’, *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* 42 (2006), 72–81, and Dean (n. 4). Recent work suggests that there may be predisposing genetic or psychological factors that increase individual susceptibility to PTSD.

⁴³ See Hoge et al. (n. 40).

⁴⁴ The efficacy and importance of headgear can be deduced from the death of the Epirrote general Pyrrhus from a roof tile during the sack of Argos (Plut. *Vit. Pyrrh.* 34.2). It is likely that the Romans designed their helmets with an eye to blunting the force of the blows they most often encountered. Connolly has argued that helmet design in the Republican period suggests a crouching fighting stance (P. Connolly, ‘The Roman Fighting Technique Deduced from Armor and Weaponry’, *Roman Frontier Studies* [1989], 353–68), but my own view is that the change in helmet design may signal instead a shift in the role of troops from performing assaults on towns and fortifications when the empire was expanding (and the blows would more often rain from above) to the defence and guarding of the frontiers.

⁴⁵ W. Schlenger et al., ‘Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Comorbidity’, in P. Saigh and J. D. Bremner (eds.), *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* (Boston, MA, 1990), 70. J. Shay, ‘Homer’s Leaders in America’s Forces: Leadership and

During the Second World War, Eugene B. Sledge describes the experience of being shelled on Peleliu in this way:

To me, artillery was an invention of hell. The onrushing whistle and scream of the big steel package of destruction was the pinnacle of violent fury and the embodiment of pent-up evil....I developed a passionate hatred for shells. To be killed by a bullet seemed so clean and surgical but shells would not only tear and rip the body, they tortured one's mind almost beyond the brink of sanity. After each shell I was wrung out, limp and exhausted. During prolonged shelling, I often had to restrain myself and fight back a wild inexorable urge to scream, to sob, and to cry. As Peleliu dragged on, I feared that if I ever lost control of myself under shell fire my mind would be shattered. To be under heavy shell fire was to me by far the most terrifying of combat experiences. Each time it left me feeling more forlorn and helpless, more fatalistic, and with less confidence that I could escape the dreadful law of averages that inexorably reduced our numbers. Fear is many-faceted and has many subtle nuances, but the terror and desperation endured under heavy shelling are by far the most unbearable.⁴⁶

The psychological effect of shelling seems to result from the combined effect of awaiting injury while at the same time having no power to combat it.

We come next to the issue of psychology. By psychology I do not mean the actual functioning of the Roman mind but rather its psychological conditioning: a Roman male's social and cultural expectations of his place in the world. Feelings of helplessness and fatalism were probably a less alien experience for most Romans – even those in the upper classes. In general, the Romans inhabited a world that was significantly more brutal and uncertain than our own. In the modern developed world, our infant mortality rates are about ten per thousand. In Rome, it is estimated that this number was three hundred per thousand. Three-tenths of infants would die within the first year, and an additional fifth would not make it to the age of ten – thus a full half of the children born would not survive childhood.⁴⁷ Anecdotal evidence supports these statistics: Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, gave birth to twelve children between 163 BC and 152 BC; all twelve survived their father's death in 152 BC, but only three survived to adulthood. Marcus Aurelius and his wife, Faustina, had at least twelve

Prevention of Psychological and Moral Injury', in Cosmopoulos (n. 5), 274, suggests that the trail of PTSD 'goes cold' three centuries ago because the psychological phenomena of PTSD 'were previously attributed to the supernatural agency, i.e. gods, ghosts, demons, spirits, curses, premonitions, taboos, magic spells, hexes, prophetic dreams, and hauntings'.

⁴⁶ E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (New York, 2007), 74.

⁴⁷ T. Parkin, *Demography and Roman Society* (Baltimore, MD, 1992), 92; B. Frier, 'Roman Life Expectancy: Ulpian's Evidence', *HSPH* 86 (1982), 249, estimates an infant mortality rate of 466.9 per 1,000.

children but only the future emperor Commodus survived.⁴⁸ Whether or not such mortality rates led to a psychologically self-protective lack of attachment to one's progeny,⁴⁹ the regular death of offspring would have contributed to a fatalistic worldview. Harsh experience may have conditioned a certain acquiescence to suffering and death.

Thomas Palaima has noted in the present day a widening chasm 'between the civilian sphere and the combat sphere', caused by the trend of hiding 'from view naturally occurring and even necessary violence and death within normal civilized life'.⁵⁰ In other words, where the Romans had animal sacrifice, we have ground beef in plastic wrap. Even the sight of human bodies, the work of the executioner, would have been on view for any Roman.⁵¹ The display of those executed offered a harsh moral lesson but also perhaps desensitized men to the sights they would witness in battle. One of the omens that foretold the rise of Vespasian was a dog that ran into the dining hall carrying a human hand it had scavenged from a cadaver and then dropped it under Vespasian's table (Suet. *Vesp.* 5.4). Stories like this give a sense of how common bodies were amid the stuff and offal of Rome.⁵² This desensitization to seeing death would have increased with the development and spread of the gladiatorial games. Another avenue for increased tolerance of witnessing (and inflicting) physical violence was corporal punishment within the military, such as *fastuvarium*, the cudgelling death inflicted by one's fellow soldiers (Polyb. 6.37).⁵³

I would argue that we experience war very differently from the way the Romans did. In Freud's essay 'The Disillusionment of War', he describes the conflict between our civilian moral codes – which offer the strict injunction not to do violence to other human beings – and wartime, when men are commanded to violate such prohibitions. It is a terrible thing to try to navigate 'Thou shalt not kill' and the necessity of killing in combat.⁵⁴ It is sometimes the case that the qualities that

⁴⁸ Parkin (n. 47), 94.

⁴⁹ Toner (n. 5), 62.

⁵⁰ Palaima (n. 30), 20.

⁵¹ On the visibility of exposed bodies, see W. Barry, 'Exposure, Mutilation, and Riot: Violence at the *Scalae Gemoniae* in Early Imperial Rome', *G&R* 55 (2008), 222–5; on public punishment, see T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World. A Reappraisal* (Cambridge, 1985), 5–10.

⁵² A. Scobie, 'Slums, Sanitation, and Mortality in the Roman World', *Clio* 68 (1986), 418.

⁵³ S. Phang, *Roman Military Service. Ideologies of Discipline in the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge, 2008), 120–31; J. B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army 31 BC–AD 235* (Oxford, 1984), 303–5.

⁵⁴ D. Grossman and D. Molloy, 'Why Can't Johnny Kill? The Psychology and Physiology of Interpersonal Combat', in B. Molloy (ed.), *The Cutting Edge. Studies in Ancient and Medieval Combat* (Tempus Press, 2007), 195–202.

make the best soldier do not make the best civilian, a point amply attested in Greek poetry by heroes such as Heracles and Odysseus. The Romans, for their part, celebrated heroes such as Cincinnatus, who could command effectively and then leave behind the power he wielded to return to his humble plough. It is important, however, when evaluating combat and its effects in the ancient world, that we do not read our ambivalence about violence onto the Romans. They inhabited an empire whose prosperity was quite openly tied to conquest. As Zimmerman puts it:

The pain of the other, seen on the distorted faces of public and private monuments, or heard in the screams of criminals in the amphitheatre, reassured Romans of their own place in the world. Violence was a pervasive presence in the public space; indeed, it was an important basis for its existence, pertaining as it did not only to victories over external enemies but also to the internal order of the state.⁵⁵

Violence was both the means and the expression of Roman power.

I believe that we must be cautious when we map the past too neatly upon our own experiences or, conversely, our own experiences too neatly upon the past. While there are similarities and continuities, the relationship between ancient and modern must be carefully parsed. All lovers of the classical past are familiar with how the study of the Greeks and Romans awakens profound and contradictory feelings of identification and alienation. With respect to combat trauma, the shock felt by a modern soldier upon seeing a corpse for the first time would have been incomprehensible to the Romans, who were surrounded by death. Likewise, modern technology – with its distant, impersonal, and terrifyingly effective weapons, its instantaneous communication between home front and front line, and the speed of return from combat – requires an adaptability and an ability to get one’s head around big spaces and multiple actors that would never have been demanded from a Roman legionary. My own view is that our soldiers actually face more complicated psychological factors than did the Romans – including a populace that largely avoids the realities of war while still wishing to enjoy the profits of it. In addition, as our understanding of what causes PTSD grows we may find a paradox: distance weapons, developed to provide overwhelming military superiority and to shield troops from the fear and horror of close combat, may in fact cause

⁵⁵ M. Zimmermann, ‘Violence in Late Antiquity Reconsidered’, in H. A. Drake (ed.), *Violence in Late Antiquity. Perceptions and Practices* (Aldershot, 2007), 347.

more trauma, whether owing to the shockwaves they send through the brain or to the sense of helplessness they engender.

In the end, the question of whether the Romans suffered PTSD is probably unanswerable, but the problem itself exposes many of the challenges posed by the historical study of the past. The view that the Graeco-Roman world knew PTSD is fast becoming dogma.⁵⁶ Supporting this view is their exposure to close combat and the fact that war is hell wherever and whenever it is fought. However, as we learn more about concussive brain injuries and slowly unravel the various causes of PTSD, I suspect that the evidence will point to a lower frequency of PTSD in the ancient world than that experienced by our troops in the present day. Our conclusions must be independent of the efficacy that has been found in using ancient literature and drama to help our veterans heal and must also wait upon the scientific processes of psychological medicine as both the definition and diagnosis of PTSD are refined. Our impatience as Classicists is due to the fact that, while our data are mostly secure, the medical data are in a rapid state of flux.

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⁵⁶ See above, nn. 4–9.