

**„SYMPOZJUM EGEJSKIE”**

**PROCEEDINGS OF  
“THE 2ND STUDENTS’ CONFERENCE  
IN AEGEAN ARCHAEOLOGY:  
METHODS – RESEARCHES – PERSPECTIVES”**

**INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND**

**APRIL 25TH, 2014**



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**PIETRO MILITELLO – KATARZYNA ŻEBROWSKA**

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COMITATO SCIENTIFICO

Kazimierz Lewartowski (Uniwersytet Warszawski)

Agata Ulanowska (Uniwersytet Warszawski)

Katarzyna Żebrowska (Uniwersytet Warszawski)

REDAZIONE

Katarzyna Żebrowska (Uniwersytet Warszawski)

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(Uniwersytet Warszawski)

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Corso di Laurea in Archeologia, opzione internazionale  
Università degli Studi di Catania  
Piazza Dante 32, 95124 Catania  
[milipi@unict.it](mailto:milipi@unict.it)

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STEFANOS SKARMINTZOS\*

ANCIENT WARRIOR REENACTMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF EXPERIMENTAL  
ARCHAEOLOGY

TESTING THEORIES AND ATTEMPTING TO PROVIDE ANSWERS ON THE MYSTERIES OF  
ANCIENT WARFARE WHILE POPULARIZING ARCHEOLOGICAL SCIENCE AND HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

The objective of this article is to underline the issues of uncertainty on established and new archeological and other academic theories on ancient warfare and to suggest were and how academics can collaborate with skilled enthusiasts and attempt to clarify how they can work together in order to eliminate obstacles and set guidelines to ensure the maximum –scientifically valid-result that can be achieved through their combined efforts.

For better or worse, warfare is an elementary part of human existence. The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus is credited with the following verse: “War is the Father of all things, it brought up the gods. And the humans some made free and others made slaves”<sup>2</sup>. The study of ancient warfare presents its own challenges when we delve in the exploration of Antiquity. Bridging the distance of time and trying to understand how our ancestors thought and felt and how they dealt with problems with the means we believe they had available was never an easy task. I use the term “we believe” because many times we can do nothing more than just interpret ambiguous texts or making educated guesses upon unearthed items that we do not know their precise usage or reasons for their existence. Based on surviving art and literature theories have been formed. Have they ever been tested and how? What do we know for sure and what do we speculate? Ancient sources give us description of fighting, of wars and warriors, of campaigns and battles. There are three main categories of ancient texts: poetry, philosophy and history, each with set of challenges for attempts to gather information on ancient warfare.

The aim of ancient poetry is mainly to say hymns to the gods or to praise the mighty lords of the time. Poetry can be a labyrinth of verbal acrobatics that many times force us

\* Stefanos Skarmintzos is a historical researcher, currently in M.A. course in Military History at the University of Wolverhampton, a member of the Living History Association *Hetairoi* (Germany), he also practices ancient weapons with Hoplomachia Academy (Greece).

<sup>1</sup> Images and their depictions are at the end of the text. Artifacts come from the author’s collection collection (unless otherwise specified), reconstructions are courtesy of the Associations of Historical Studies *Hetairoi and Sydney Ancients*, which deals with Experimental Archaeology, historical reconstructions and reenacting. Core of the Association’s studies is the Study of Ancient Greek Warfare through Experimental Archaeology techniques. Ancient Warriors and Ancient Military Reenactment is the outward image of the Association’s activities.

<sup>2</sup> Hippolytus, *Refutation*, 9.9.4.

to try and understand what the poem composer really wanted to say. Other times in his effort to praise an individual or his ancestors, the author might give descriptions of fighting that bear little resemblance to the ways of war of the poet's time. A good example is the lyric poet Callinus who, in order to raise the spirits of his countrymen in a time of crisis, praises individual valor and gives epic description of a lone hoplite in a period where phalanx fighting was the norm and individual heroics, that could endanger the formation, were frowned upon<sup>3</sup>. Although artistic expression of poetry differs from historical narrative and though sometimes doubt can be cast upon poetic descriptions, the Homeric verses that describe how weapons destroy human tissue and bone, no matter how chilling, can give us an idea of weapon usage. But it is precisely that: an idea, not the whole of a given situation.

The aim of ancient philosophy was (and still is, one can say) to teach individuals how to improve their morals and to promote harmony among humans and, in the end, to provide answers in the fundamental issues of human existence. When war or warriors are mentioned they are depicted so as to show an example to be followed or avoided, not of the details of the actions that they performed. In Plato's "Laws", a Cretan and an Athenian talk about how to setup a future colony. In book one the Cretan Cleinias says that horses are not highly esteemed in Crete because the island is not flat like Thessaly. In book eight the Athenian who has experience of the Scythian mercenaries employed by his city, urges Cleinias to arrange training programs and equestrian sports in order to create cavalry and horse-archer units in the new colony. It is clear that the Cretans have no mounted archers of their own and the Athenian (Plato?) suggests their formation. No details how the horse-archers operated are given though.

Ancient historians give mostly tactical information of group movement, but they seldom go into detail. Even the biographer Plutarch, when he writes about the training that many characters received or gave their troops, he does not give details. For example, in his "Life of Cimon" he writes about Cimon giving superb training to the Athenian fleet<sup>4</sup>. As no ancient trierarch's manual survived, we can only speculate on the type and methods of training. Another example is Herodotus who writes that the Athenians advanced swiftly upon the Persians in Marathon, but does not give details<sup>5</sup>. Another problem with historical texts is that surviving ancient military manuals instruct about group movement and preserve ancient commands but they do not give details on the ancient weapon usage, nor detailed instructions as to how the actions were to be executed. Most ancient authors seem not to have preoccupied themselves with aspects that they consider well known to their audiences.

In ancient art depictions of warriors and conflict are plentiful and to be found in various museums around the globe. But the various artifacts exhibited in the museums

<sup>3</sup> MULROY, D. ed (1999), *Early Greek Lyric Poetry*, 41-42.

<sup>4</sup> PLUTARCH, *Life of Cimon*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> HERODOTUS, *Histories*, 6.112.

are just giving a general idea of what was happening (Fig. 1). Defensive weapons like armor and shields aided the wearer to avoid harm, while offensive close combat weapons, like swords and spears, allowed the fighters to engage the enemy hand to hand, while ranged weapons allowed the fighters to hit their adversaries from a distance. Unfortunately, the merciless passage of time has left few ancient artifacts to come complete in our hands. Most of the organic components have withered away through centuries further, hindering our understanding of the items' construction and usage. The details of the artifacts usage, under various places and weather conditions, and all parameters affecting their performance, are still elusive to us. We may attempt to reconstruct these items and attempt to draw conclusions, But when the outcome of these efforts takes material form more questions will be raised (Fig. 2). Why the individual had to carry these items? How did they function? What benefits did they offer to him? Are our reconstructions practical and functional?

From the above we conclude that most information on what ancient warfare conditions really were is anecdotal and fragmented thus hindering scholars in forming a clear picture. Is there any room for improvement? Can reenacting ancient life and people who occupy themselves with living history help the academics in solving the mysteries of ancient warfare? Living history and reenacting ancient times can help if it becomes part of Experimental Archaeology. Successful examples exist but they concern more recent historical periods. Understanding Medieval, and 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century warfare has progressed a lot because of the cooperation of re-enactors and academics. It can very well show the path that academics and living history enthusiasts have to take in the study of ancient warfare.

According to Plutarch, re-enacting previous history events may have well started in the Archaic Era<sup>6</sup>. In modern times the believes are that they did. Academics and re-enactors can work together by combining knowledge and skills to reach a common objective. Re-enactors must focus on historical accuracy and not spectacle, and closely work with scholars. Visual only accuracy of reconstruction can merely give a starting point. Historical accuracy can increase understanding. When properly guided by the scholars, in order to ensure academic integrity and validity of data and processes, the re-enactors can offer their help in scientific research. The knowledge of individual re-enactors in using reconstructed historical items can aid scholars to simulate, and in some cases to recreate, the conditions that existed in the ancient military affairs and thus a new insight can be gained and new knowledge can come from furthering our understanding on ancient warfare

Successful examples, like Trireme Olympias and reconstructed ancient machines, can be used as an example and starting point for further research. Those projects of Experimental Archeology, such as a technical analysis of a reconstructed ancient weapon usage, a hoplite Phalanx drill or the execution of a martial drill with reconstructed Bronze

<sup>6</sup> PLUTRACH, *Life of Solon*, 9.

Age armor and equipment, can help us gaining an understanding on the details of ancient warfare – a great deal of which are long lost to us (Fig 3). In certain cases, in a controlled environment, even animals can participate in furthering our understanding of e.g. cavalry operations or answer our questions of the individual horseman’s methods and actions in fight. Possibilities for development can be described as limitless, but we must always remember that the correct method is to follow as strictly as possible original sources and make use of all the information that the hard work of scholars made available to us and reconstruct items used in ancient warfare as historically accurate as possible (Figs. 3, 4).

To produce the most positive result, the Experimental Archaeology projects should be done first with the collaboration of re-enactors and scholars in the academic environment and then the product of this work can be presented to the general public through Living History events in the open air museums, presenting the past in a realistic way, which can be achieved from the natural fusion of protagonists and spectators. The next step is the usage of all this new knowledge to create mass media productions that will entertain and educate an even greater audience.

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Fig. 1 Museum exhibits give us examples of fighting and military equipment but not of the details of its precise usage (Left: Copenhagen Museum, Courtesy of Yves Lamonier; Right: Benaki Museum, Stefanos Skatmintzos Archive).

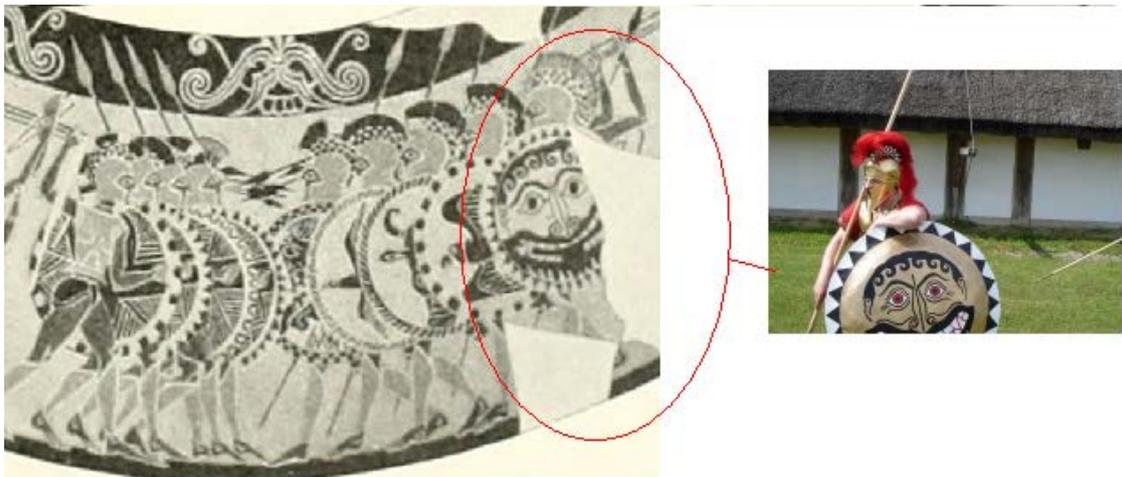


Fig. 2 We may attempt reconstructions from these items and attempt to draw conclusions (Chigi vase, [en.wikipedia.org](https://en.wikipedia.org) , and a hoplite reconstruction based on it, courtesy of Living History Association *Hetairoi*, Germany).



Fig. 3 A hoplite Phalanx drill or the execution of a martial drill with reconstructed equipment and commands base on ancient sources (Courtesy of Living History Association *Hetairoi*, Germany).



Fig. 4 The correct method is to follow as strictly as possible original sources and make use of all the information that the hard work of scholars made available to us and reconstruct items used in ancient warfare as historically accurate as possible (photo of boar-tusk helmet from Athens War Museum, Stefanos Skarmintzos archive; Reconstructed Mycenaean Warrior, courtesy of the Living History Assosiation *Sydney Ancients*, Australia).