



# *L'altra faccia di Marte: sconfitti e donne nelle guerre del mondo antico*

a cura di  
Vincenzo Micaletti, Fabrizio Lusani,  
Fabiana Rosaci









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# GLOSSING OVER THE FROWNE UPON INVOLVEMENT

*The characterisation of women during urban  
warfare in the Classical period*

ALESSANDRO CARLI

## Introduction

The Ancient Greeks perceived war as exclusively a male domain, this belief was deeply rooted in their culture. In the history of each polis characterised by tumultuous interactions between neighbouring communities, warfare represented an ordinary experience when the available men took up arms and left their city to confront the enemy. Warfare includes the participation of foreign resident as well as the growing employment of mercenaries in the fourth century, each followed by their slaves: in short, warfare encompassed a broad spectrum of male life<sup>1</sup>. This reading describes fights that took place far from the city and consisted of land and sea conflicts. However, the literary sources often mention the involvement of urban centres where social groups, traditionally excluded from military operations, partially joined the fights. During these circumstances, women began to assume roles of some significance, albeit the lack of a detailed and systematic description by the sources.

Through the wide range of gender studies which has seen growth in recent years<sup>2</sup>, scholars have shed light on several instances where women played active roles in their customarily domestic functions as well as in collective spheres of life such as religion<sup>3</sup>, warfare, or rather its specific

1 CARTLEDGE 1998, pp. 63-64; VAN WEES 2007, pp. 298-299.

2 The variety and the breadth of the subject are renowned in various field of studies on Ancient Greece: for a selective but accurate bibliography PEPE 2023, pp. 141-142. On women and war see the monograph of FABRE-SERRIS – KEITH 2015 and the doctoral thesis of MORALES 2015. For a survey of studies published before 2010: WINTJES 2012, pp. 19-21.

3 Rituals are one of the areas where women took part in the community's life outside the home borders

moments, was no less. However, apart from the instances of women participating in military activities during the Hellenistic age, which are out of our study<sup>4</sup>, scholars have dedicated considerable attention to anecdotes involving individual women who defended their cities. In these studies, as often happens, the reader encounters references and, in some instances, thorough descriptions of Telesilla's story, the fabled Argive woman who led a group of women against the Spartans after the defeat of the Argive army at Sepeia<sup>5</sup>. It is important to acknowledge that these episodes hold significance in some cases, and it is commendable that scholars have paid the proper attention to the related matters. Nevertheless, it is essential remember that classical sources often stress how women did not wield weapons, according to the male perspective of that time<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, the sources that describe these episodes are not only chronologically distant from the period covered but also portray these stories anecdotally, outlining women as incompatible with their standard characterisation. In this regard, we believe that failing to embrace a different perspective can lean a misleading framework regarding the factual impact of women in military urban

(PARKER 2011, pp. 240-243), for instance at Athens the rites of passage quoted notoriously by ARI-STOPH. *Lys.*, 641-645 (concisely JOUANNA 2019, pp. 132-136 with bibliography). Even though the concept of marginality regarding women in ancient Greece needs to be employed cautiously (cf. GALLO 1984; FERRUCCI 2008, pp. 509-517), war rituals are a male prerogative and the active role of women is not attested: GRAF 1984; LOMAN 2004, pp. 39-40.

4 CARNEY 2004 and CARNEY 2021, pp. 331-332.

5 PAUS. 4, 20, 8-10. DUCREY 2015, pp. 185-186; DE MARRE 2020, p. 37. Stories regarding women in wartime fall within folktale motives: Graf 1984, pp. 245-254, who, among the various reflections, has underlined three motives on the fictitiousness Telesilla's tale. The image of the Argive woman as portrayal of an inverted world vd. VIDAL-NAQUET, 1988 pp. 198-199. Cf. HORNBLOWER 2007, pp. 43-44. For the interconnections and stratifications of local memories on Telesilla: FRANCHI 2012.

6 The case of Sinope's siege described by Aineias Tacticus (AEN. TACT. 40, 4-5) is exemplary: due to the lack of men, the besieged carefully selected women marked with masculine traits: they were deployed with bronze tools on the parapet walk to mislead the enemies. It is clearcut the women's depersonalization for the success of optical deception. As shown by BETTALLI 1990, pp. 336-337 women, excluded by the "game of war" according the vivid scholar's metaphor, could take part in it only with male dresses. By the thought of that time, Aineias adds: «Βάλλειν <δε> οὐκ εἶον αὐτάς· πόρρωθεν γὰρ κατάδηλος βάλλουσα γυνή». Such sentence aroused a heated debate (WHITEHEAD 1990, p. 206). MORALES 2015, p. 115 has pointed out that Aineias is speaking about an hand-on experience, that the Greeks recognised at once, thus it means that women often fulfilled such task. We believe that STRAUSS 2007 is off course when he has suggested the "gender forbidding": men prevented women from throwing, yet, in criticizing him, it is partially true when MORALES 2021, p. 155 n. 13 explaining the customary women's tiles throwing. We are in presence of a revealing cultural outlook: for the Greeks, women should not held weapons generally neither during this stratagem based on visual trickery, otherwise the enemy could disclose the trickery. Cfr. BAYNHAM 2025 pp. 119-120 n. 19.

operations, particularly during the Classical period<sup>7</sup>. On this point, some scholars have drawn attention to the function played by unanimous women in a military context, stressing or diminishing their importance. Nevertheless, scholars face constraints when attempting to assess the real impact of women's military involvement. For instance, scholars are compelled, sometimes regrettably or implicitly, to confess the inherent limitations in establishing female military decisiveness<sup>8</sup>. When someone seeks to take an all-embracing look at the available sources, a prevailing consensus emerges regarding the male perspective permeating these historical accounts<sup>9</sup>. Ancient authors are inclined to emphasise the abnormal nature of these occasions and, consequently, they tend to portray the women through a lens shaped by their male viewpoint. Indeed, social expectations demanded that women be consistent with the male-oriented point of view, even in critical scenarios such as the defence of their city. Women were always called upon to adhere to male standards.

Given the nature of the available evidence, we intend to discuss how these sources underscore the alterity between women and warfare, emphasizing that the former were not expected to engage in fights, at least in theory. Then, we will delve into the motivations that compelled men and women to defend their polis together. In conclusion, owing to the sources' prevailing biased point of view, we will examine how women are specifically portrayed in the context of urban warfare. In opposition to the conventional focus on siege warfare as a moment of collaboration between males and females, we embrace the definition of urban warfare for its comprehensiveness about women's agency. While "siege warfare" describes a military situation where an external enemy seeks to overpower defenders within a walled area, "urban warfare" encompasses a broader spectrum of asymmetrical military operations. The latter embraces scenarios of more or less improvised defence and civil strives, where women's involvement

7 It is enough to keep attention on the sourcebook written by MACLACHLAN 2012, pp. 180-186: in the only six pages devoted to the women's military role, where the reader expects to discover historical episodes, the author covers the Amazons' myth, the hackneyed tale of Telesilla and the Herodotean portrayal of Artemisia.

8 The studies of SHAPS 1982 and LOMAN 2004 remain basic, for having set the main problems and the research perspective. Now vd. MORALES 2021, pp. 150-151 on the current research's tendencies.

9 Needless to say that "all surviving word of Classical Greek was written by a man": vd. DOVER 1974, p. 95.

took place by force of circumstance<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, compared with siege warfare, the multifaced and often discordant nature of urban warfare allows us to question whether, according their point of view, males always asked for female cooperation. We examine whether Greeks expected women's consistent involvement in urban warfare or if were instances where women were excluded from participation. Building on this discussion, we aim to discern if during urban warfare, in all its facets, women's involvement transgressed or not social boundaries.

### The Homeric background of gender boundaries within warfare

From their cultural standpoint, the Greeks regarded warfare and female nature as opposed domains, to the extent that social etiquette enjoined wives to engage in discussions of military matters, even with their husbands. This attitude is evident in Hector's reaction during the well-known episode in Book VI of the *Iliad*. In this scene, his wife, Andromache, played the role of wise adviser. When she encountered him by chance, she expressed her concern for his well-being and made some suggestions. First, he should have given priority to his safety, seeking refuge within the city's tower; then, Andromache proposed the strategic positioning of the troops near the fig tree, an area that had witnessed three previous Achaean assaults. From a contemporary reader's sensibility, Andromache sought to support her husband given the wartime circumstances. However, it is undeniable that the ordinary Greek male of the fifth century would have judged her words to be at odds with prevailing social norms. Rather than appreciating his wife's concern, Hector reproached Andromache for her improper behaviour, which had even been publicly displayed. He summoned her to come back home immediately, insisting that she should focus on fulfilling her marital responsibilities, such as managing the handloom and overseeing the handmaidens. Warfare, in contrast, was reserved exclusively for

10 For a preliminary conceptualisation of siege warfare vd. KERN 1999, pp. 1-21 despite some approximations and now ECHEVERRIA REY 2021 pp. 71-72. On urban warfare during classical period vd. LEE 2010, who highlights how urban warfare's matters have risen to the forefront in theoretical war studies after war in Afghanistan. For an overview on lexical problems vd. LUCAS 2021, p. 117.

men, with Hector occupying a preeminent role in his city's defence. While Hector's response may seem tactless, it is noteworthy to recognise that, from the Greeks' perspective, he was clearly outlining the societal norms that defined the boundaries of male and female roles. Within this cultural framework, the dichotomic distinction between external and internal roles manifested the sharp dividing line between male and female responsibilities<sup>11</sup>. While men were entrusted with warfare, women had no involvement in military affairs or related matters. There is no surprise if the Greeks regarded any well-intentioned advice or random counsel provided by a woman as an unwelcome intrusion into a domain where she had no prerogative. The notoriety of Hector's reply becomes not only a sort of apophthegm even among scholars who treat the topic of women and warfare<sup>12</sup>. The vivid verse πόλεμος δ' ἄνδρεσσι μελήσει is ascribed to Lysistrata by Aristophanes too, when the celebrated woman mimed her husband, probably articulating his voice. The Homeric quotation, undoubtedly grasped by the Athenian public, serves as a culmination of the overall portrayal of women's incongruity from military matters: since the outbreak of the conflict, Athenian women stayed on the sidelines and, when they dared to inquire on civic decisions<sup>13</sup>, the husbands summoned them to remain silent. If wives had any distrust, their husbands urged them to return to the usual domestic duties, symbolised by the handloom. From the two instances, we can infer that Hector and the husband in Aristophanes' comedy shared the same cultural viewpoint<sup>14</sup> - that the Greeks regarded military affairs and

11 It remains one of the most debated topic among scholars (for an handy prospect BERTELLI 2014, pp. 735-744). According to Xenophon, the god set the female nature to indoor tasks (XEN. *Oec.* 7, 22). This section has been accurately highlighted by PISCHEDDA 2019, pp. 85-86. Instead, NATALI 1988, pp. 228-229 has advisably compare Xenophon with some Aristotelian passages (ARIST. *E.N.* 1162a 16-24; *Pol.* 1277b sgg.). Moreover, the Xenophontean *Isomachos* employs the metaphor of the queen bee to explain the woman indoor role: POMEROY 1988, pp. 276-280. Cf. WINTIJS 2002, pp. 21-22.

12 SCHAPS 1982, p. 197; PAYEN 2004, pp. 26-27; HORNBLOWER 2007, p. 42; PAYEN 2011, p. 33; ROUSSEAU 2015, *passim*; NAPPI 2015, pp. 36-37; PAYEN 2015, p. 216; MORALES 2015, pp. 28-29.

13 ARISTOPH. *Lys.* 507-520 stands indispensable. The threat of beatings was not a comic joke and it need a contextualization into a domestic abuse system (LLEWELLYN-JONES 2011, pp. 248-249). Rightly, PERUSINO 2020, pp. 221-222 has highlighted the silence customarily assigned to women in the tragedy (cf. AESCH. *Sept.* 232; SOPH. *Aj.* 293). The decisions discussed in the assemblies were secret, actually it was habit that citizens did not share civic issue with their slaves (Theoph. 4, 2 for the bumpkin's attitude: DIGGLE 2004, 210), hence that went for the sharing with wives (DOVER 1974, pp. 97-98 quoting LYK. *Leokr.* 141).

14 On this ban for military affairs see ROUSSEAU 2015, pp. 15-33. Although inclusive, the adviser's women role stands out in the study of DE MARRE 2020, pp. 33-34.

women as inherently incompatible<sup>15</sup>. Even in front of war's primary consequence – death and mourning – women were expected to remain silent<sup>16</sup>. The absolute interdiction between women and warfare is deeply rooted in the Hellenic background, even in comparison with the “other” women: this gender approach is endorsed when sources often depict barbarian women, especially Persians, as advisors in military or violent affairs<sup>17</sup>. According to the Greeks, women not from their world – the Mediterranean and Hellenocentric world – had male characters, especially the warrior one<sup>18</sup>.

These observations can be applied to wide range of circumstances where warfare remained detached from the city. However, when a foreign enemy moved closer to the wall, the mothers, wives and daughters got anxious about their men who were engaged in the city's defence. This marked the first involvement of women in the military sphere despite the physical distance. An illustrative scenario is the famous duel in the third book of the *Iliad*. The Homeric description of Helen observing Paris and Menelaus in the presence of Priam and other prominent Trojans requires no preliminary introduction. This episode serves as a prototypical pattern, not only within the literary theme of *teichoscopia*, but also as an authentic situation where women engaged with warfare as non-participants. Besides the concern exhibited by these women, the famine presence influenced the actions of the

15 One example from the Spartan history could be explanatory: needs no presentation Gorgo, the famed daughter of Cleomenes and Leonidas's wife (on this woman: PARADISO 1993) was notorious for her recommendation to the father who was prayed by Aristagoras (HDT., V 51: NENCI 1994, pp. 228-239). Despite her role of “wise adviser” (MILLENDER 1999, p. 357), in addition to the Aristagoras' request of driving her apart since – we suppose – she was not only a child but also a girl. Aristagoras underlined the military benefits on Spartan intervention in Asia, then one would be expected to advice the father on those matters, but she made recommendation to him regarding the deception of the foreigner. It is fascinating that Herodotus does not report any Gorgo's replay on war issues.

16 It is inevitable consider the disputed words regarding women in the mouth of Pericles: THUC. 2, 45, 2. The debate is broad (HORNBLOWER 1991, p. 314), particularly for the Thucydidean women's description (WIEDEMANN 1983; HARVEY 1985): scholars have called attention to the negative (DOVER 1974, p. 98) or the positive (GOMME 1956, p. 143) aspect of φύσις. In addition to the suggestive reading by CARTLEDGE 1993, pp. 125-132, justly doubted by FANTASIA 2003, p. 420, it is preferable to accept the explanation of RUSTEN 1989, 175-176. On the Plutarchean reading of this passage of Thucydides see KALLET-MARX 1993, pp. 133-144.

17 Concisely DEWALD 1980, pp. 14-15, for a more detailed analysis vd. LLEWELLYN-JONES 2020, pp. 360-378 with bibliography.

18 The most paradigmatic example are the Amazons (cf. HDT, 4, 110-115; *et. al.*): cf. HARDWICK 1990, pp. 14-36; FANTHAM – FOLEY – KAMPEN – POMEROY – SHAPIRO 1994 and the monography of MEYER 2015, pp. 44-50 especially for the Herodotean narrative. Iconography: LISSARAGUE 1990 pp. 235-237.



men safeguarding the community against the enemy<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, during this exclusively male performance, women maintained only a liminal connection with the conflicts, primarily due to the vertical physical distance separating them from the battlefield. While the wall constituted the practical defence to get over the enemy and were the main fortification upon which the bulk of the city's defence rested, they also held a deep symbolic value<sup>20</sup>. The walls represented the self-determination and the degree of autonomy of one polis in relation to others. Furthermore, the walls constituted the ultimate physical and symbolic boundary demarcating the external world and the most hidden part of the polis, between warfare and women.

Once again, Homer provides us with an insight into women's evolving role during military affairs. In the well-known paradigmatic description of the Achilles' shield, while the invaders and the defenders engaged outside the city, women - including children and elderly citizens - positioned themselves on the parapets, but this time, they were in ambushade<sup>21</sup>. Evidently, the situation could shift if the enemies were about to breach or had already crossed the walls. At that moment, the dichotomy of the outside and inside world faded, and the latter came in direct contact with that which it had hitherto remained detached from. Nevertheless, as we shall see, this contact, despite its proximity, always preserved a certain degree of distance. Yet, since the Greeks recognised the feminine as antithetical to the all-male prerogative of warfare, for the modern reader, a consequential question arises: why did women join the defence instead of seeking refuge in their house? As we shall see in the next section, urban warfare and its most perilous sub-category, siege warfare, could have disastrous outcomes, especially for women.

19 For women in the Iliad vd. NAPPI 2014, pp. 34-51. The description in HOM. *Il.* 3, 425-435 has been accurately analysed by FUHRER 2014 in her study on the *teichoscopyia*, where she has shed light on the importance of physical distance between the fighters and the non-combatants. On women's encouragement vd. in general terms MORALES 2015, pp. 120-121.

20 In recent years, the symbolic value of the wall for the polis is a topic that has grown exponentially: cf. MÜTH 2016; MÜTH 2016b; MÜTH 2021, pp. 248-249. Cf. ARMSTRONG – TRUNDLE 2019, pp. 7-8.

21 HOM. *Il.* 18, 517-519: «τείχος μὲν ῥ' ἄλοχοί τε φίλαι καὶ νήπια τέκνα / ῥύατ' ἐφρεσταότες, μετὰ δ' ἄνδρες οὗς ἔχε γῆρας». The verses inserted in the description of the Achilles' shield (always crucial MUSTI 2008, pp. 3-28) are an interesting example of the usually non-combatants' excluded who were ready to act if necessary. The keyword of this Homeric quote is ἄλοχοί. The question on the ambushades in the Homeric poems is disputed: for an thorough account see SHELDON 2012, pp. 1-13 who, however, has not included these verses in her survey.

## Uncontrolled warfare: urban warfare and lawless violence

The Greeks had more awareness of the perils of the siege aftermath than modern assumptions as regards the Greek attitude toward their defeated enemies. This is not the appropriate place here for reviving the hoary debate on the presence or absence of the war's rules. This is primarily grounded in modern sensibility despite the clear violent behaviours exhibited by the Greeks<sup>22</sup>. Nevertheless, among scholars, there is growing recognition that, depending on the outcome, the sieges could be the vanishing point for the community's existence, particularly if the defenders capitulated<sup>23</sup>. Although the complete destruction of the polis at the hands of the conquerors was not always predictable<sup>24</sup> and could be contingent upon the winner's revengeful desire consistent with a long-standing enmity<sup>25</sup>, the besieged had acknowledged the forthcoming fate of their women<sup>26</sup>. The Greeks endeavoured, whenever feasible, to evacuate those individuals ill-suited for

22 At first the question regarding the presence of alleged "rules" in Greek warfare mainly among hoplites had a certain following: i.e. CONNOR 1988, pp. 3-29 and OBER 1996, pp. 54-71 especially pp. 57-57 where he has classify the several rules reporting who, among the scholars, have or not approves the individual norms (rightly some doubts and objections emerge from the contributes of KRENTZ 2002, pp. 29-39 and, more decisively, from the book of DAYTON 2006 *passim*). Also among these traditional scholars, siege warfare is viewed as borderline situation: the curious thing in this debate is that Ober has not dealt with siege warfare and its rules, but CONNOR 1988, p. 15 n. 59 has written: «Siege warfare too was governed by a code but a radically different one from that which applied to hoplite battles».

23 For the *status quaestionis* and a sharp analysis: VAN WEES 2011, especially p. 92 n. 60 where he has numbered nine sieges where the male were executed. Cf. HALL 2018, pp. 191-192: the execution of male could ward off possible retaliations.

24 The complete destruction of a captured community often did not leave traces and archaeology can or not contribute to the real understanding of this phenomenon: FACHARD – HARRIS 2021, pp. 1-33 has noted the sources' tendency to exaggerate with descriptions of annihilations, following a suggestion that was already put forward years ago (HANSEN – NIELSEN 2004, p. 122). For a detailed research on the several shades of "destruction": ECHEVERRIA REY 2021, *passim*.

25 When Athens capitulated in 404, having acknowledged their past brutality with the defeated, the citizens had to face their consciousness and they were terrified to suffer the same fate. XEN. Hell. 2, 2, 3: «οὐ μόνον τοὺς ἀπολωλότας πενθοῦντες, ἀλλὰ πολὺ μᾶλλον ἔτι αὐτοὶ ἑαυτοὺς, πείσεσθαι νομίζοντες οἷα ἐποίησαν Μηλίους τε Λακεδαιμονίων ἀποίκους ὄντας, κρατήσαντες πολιορκίᾳ, καὶ Ἰστιάεας καὶ Σκιωναίους καὶ Τωρωναίους καὶ Αἰγινήτας καὶ ἄλλους πολλοὺς τῶν Ἑλλήνων». The expression ἄλλους πολλοὺς τῶν Ἑλλήνων is revelatory of a wide-spread behaviour against the enemy that is often omitted by the sources. On the vengeance among cities LENDON 2000, pp. 15-18. The revenge motive is also highlighted by VAN WEES 2010, pp. 255-256.

26 Some desperate countermeasures sometimes were taken, i. e. the self-destruction of the polis so as not to fall in the enemies' hand: SCHAPS, 1982 has rightly kept attention on the fact that even in these occasions were the males who decided the suicidal fate of their community.

fight: namely, women, their children<sup>27</sup> and other vulnerable members of the society reached a secure place until the danger was over<sup>28</sup>. Regardless, the prospect of reoccupying the city was not always achievable when the men surrendered or, when women remained, deportations occasionally occurred<sup>29</sup>. We should admit that the primary purpose of this precautionary measure before the enemy's arrival was to have fewer mouths to feed. Nevertheless, it is undeniable their will to safeguard families too. After attempted assaults, the besieger could block the city, hence the besieged had to confront the touchable terror of starvation, the infamous λιμός<sup>30</sup>. When there were no suitable places for refuge or allied communities available to receive the asylum seekers, the women sometimes wished to share the danger with their men, or they were simply compelled to remain in the city<sup>31</sup>.

27 The question of a possible value scale of non-combatants is significant to understand the Greek mindset: who were more important to safeguard, women or children? The answer is not obvious, and, even though the sources keep attention to women too (cf. HOM. *Il.* 8, 56-57; 10, 418-422; 15, 496-499; AESCH. *Pers.* 402-405; THUC. 7, 69, 2: on these texts vd. WHITEHEAD 1990, p. 98; cf. other quotations in ECHEVERRIA REY 2017, p. 85), the sieges were seen as more dangerous for the community. Talking about οὐδεμία ἐλπίς σωτηρίας regarding the polis' fate, AEN. *TACT. praef.* 2: «Τοῖς δὲ ὑπὲρ τῶν μεγίστων μέλλουσι κινδυνεύειν, ἱερῶν καὶ πατρίδος καὶ γονέων καὶ τέκνων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων». The women are here excluded from the glosses of ὑπὲρ τῶν μεγίστων, on this silence vd. WHITEHEAD 2016, p. 41. On the predilection for children's safety over women vd. WIEDEMANN 1983, p. 164.

28 When critical situations like sieges were expected to happen at any moment, some allies put the population up: the most notorious is Plataea hosted by Athens (THUC. 2, 6, 4), Scione and Mende took refuge in Olynth (THUC. 4, 123, 4). For other evacuations see DE MARRE 2020, p. 35. Interesting was what took place at Gela with the invasion on the Carthaginians: the Geloans wanted to safeguard their wives at Syracuse, but women were resolute to remain and share the danger (DIOD. 13, 108, 6). On this latter episode vd. WINTJES 2012, pp. 22-23.

29 There were few situations where after the siege's outcome populations were deported and the refugee were allowed to bring only a few clothes; i. e. Potidaea (THUC. 2, 70, 3) or Samos (XEN. *Hell.* 2, 3, 6). Vd. VAN WEES 2004, p. 261 n. 44; VAN WEES 2010, p. 249.

30 Starvation was the traditional key to overwhelm the enemy without endangering the soldiers with direct assaults. The famine as the outcome of a siege is well attested (WHITEHEAD 2016, p. 392 for quotations), and the most notorious episode is Potidaea (THUC. 2, 70, 1) when the defenders were forced to practice cannibalism to prolong the resistance (on cannibalism and sieges: ARMSTRONG – TRUNDLE 2019, pp. 5-6.) Despite the evolution of siege engines, the Greeks, as has pointed out WINTER 1971, pp. 331-332, considered starvation always a workable option. How SCHRAMM 1928 p. 213 have theorized: the main purpose of the besieged is the safeguard of the few men available against a far numerous enemy.

31 In the same time of emigrations, it is likely that some women stayed behind: although Brasidas moved out the women of Scione, after the Athenian's occupation some women were enslaved (THUC. 5, 32, 1). The most well-known and intriguing case is the identity of the one hundred Plataean women, called bread-makers (THUC. 2, 78, 3). I. e. SCHAPS has questioned if these women were impelled or not, but at least he has admitted the impossibility to know. WINTJES 2012, pp. 23-24 has rightly shed light on the Thucydidean mention's exceptionality and the conspicuous number of them, four women for only one Plataean soldier. We do not follow this reading on the free condition of these woman because of their enslavement after the siege's outcome. They changed the owners simply. Moreover, if the other women

Therefore, Greeks attempted every conceivable effort to repel the enemies from their homeland, at least the polis<sup>32</sup>, bearing in mind that the best-case scenario for their wives and children would be to become enslaved. In a world where slavery was mainstream, the likelihood of loose the free condition was more than a bugbear, especially when the enemy approached and the same polis' existence was jeopardized. The besieged were acutely aware that their families might pass from being the masters to becoming someone else's property overnight<sup>33</sup>. It is no wonder if the Greeks were used to deal with this menace. In fact, from the well-known gloomy word of Hector to the female complaints in the Attic tragedies<sup>34</sup>, the sources do not stress a kind of literary cliché but the main and incontestable reality of the ancient Greek warfare: when a polis was conquered, the bodies inside the city and the goods were up to the victors<sup>35</sup>. Thus, the defenders knew that the fateful interlude between the moment of capitulation and the following enslavement could be marked by the most horrific acts, with rapes, at times mutilations, among other atrocities. If the besieged declared their surrender early, they could hope for more lenient treatment from the victor, although this mercy was not granted<sup>36</sup>. In this context, the sources attribute such savages to the barbarians: one cannot escape the haunting Thucydide-

have been safeguarded, it is likely these one hundred women were slaves: LUCAS 2021, p. 124 n. 36 has acutely demonstrated that the sources were used to call *σιτοποιοί* women in military situations (HDT. 3, 150; 7, 157), other times the slave condition of this role is unquestionable (XEN. *Oec.* 9, 9; 10, 10).

32 See WILL 1975, pp. 299-300 for the symbolic values of the defence too. CAMPBELL 2006, pp. 3-4 has noted that, during siege warfare, besieged usually made all effort until the enemy go away.

33 On the perpetual fear of becoming slave vd. DUCREY 2007, pp. 9-14. For the defenders' awareness of the siege as a turning-point between freedom and slavery vd. ARMSTRONG - TRUNDLE 2019, p. 2.

34 HOM. *Il.* 6, 447-464: for Hector's complaints see KERN 1999, pp. 136-137 who has underlined the typical assumption in the Homeric poems. On the pivotal role of tragedies on this matter vd. DUCREY 2007, p. 11.

35 XEN. *Cyr.* 7, 5, 73: «νόμος γὰρ ἐν πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις αἰδιὸς ἐστίν, ὅταν πολεμοῦντων πόλις ἀλῶ, τῶν ἐλόντων εἶναι καὶ τὰ σώματα τῶν ἐν τῇ πόλει καὶ τὰ χρήματα». Vd. HALL 2018 for the violence against the civilians and pp. 187-188 on this Xenophontean text. DUCREY 2019 has compared this text with XEN. *Mem.* 4, 2, 15. On the possibility of the winner to behave with the defeated as he wished vd. VAN WEES 2004, p. 126.

36 It is a tricky matter establish with a certainty the Greeks' attitude when the enemy surrendered. For an account of the position of scholars vd. KERN 1999, pp. 151-153. Among them we follow PRITCHETT 1991, pp. 205-223 who has explained how the Greeks saw the polis conquered at their disposal, then the behaviour, more or less cruel, relied on their mood. However, usually if the besieged surrendered, the winner would have spared, avoiding to kill the males and enslave the women and the children. This typical attitude emerged with equivocal situation like Mende: Thuc., IV 130.6: «οἱ δὲ Ἀθηναῖοι... ἐσπεσόντες ἐς τὴν Μένδην πόλιν, ἅτε οὐκ ἀπὸ ξυμβάσεως ἀνοιχθείσαν, ἀπάσῃ τῇ στρατιᾷ ὡς κατὰ κράτος ἐλόντες διήρπασαν, καὶ μόλις οἱ στρατηγοὶ κατέσχον ὥστε μὴ καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διαφθεῖρσθαι».

an account of the Mycalessos' sort<sup>37</sup> or the less-hackneyed but tremendously dramatic story of the fall of Selinous by Diodorus. In this latter description, the mothers were compelled to witness the Carthaginians raping their daughters. These soldiers are often depicted – by the Greeks, obviously – as the most brutal and savage among the barbarians<sup>38</sup>. While the sources often illuminate the heinous crimes committed by foreign enemies, the Greek audience knew that, perhaps even from his first-hand experience as a soldier, the rapes and similar atrocities were widespread among the Greeks too. This was not blind and indiscriminate violence on the skin of the defeated population<sup>39</sup>. Of course, it is useful not to overlook an inborn trait of siege warfare: their long endurance, which could last months or even years until the surrender, was also denoted by the consequential psychological stress for the besiegers. They had the chance to pour out their impulses built up for months, even for some years. This slaughter within the city walls, with no possibility to escape, created a closed perimeter where besiegers overflowed into the street. The women thus become a vulnerable target too. As a consequence, since this critical situation loomed and their lives were in danger, the women sometimes joined the defence. Yet, in a world where warfare was only a male prerogative, we should attempt to understand how the Greeks outlined the women's war agency<sup>40</sup>. Did the Greeks, obviously the males, appraise any urban warfare occasion as apt for collaboration with women or not?

37 THUC. 7, 29-30 generally, but see THUC. 7, 29, 5: «καὶ τότε ἄλλη τε παραχὴ οὐκ ὀλίγη καὶ ἰδέα πᾶσα καθειστήκει ὀλέθρου». According to DUCREY 1999, p. 318, here Thucydides reveals an unusual emotion and his feel was shared by his contemporaries, even more since the massacre was carried out by the Thracians.

38 On the daughters rape under the mothers' eyes vd. DIOD., 13, 58, 1-2. In the following paragraphers, Diodorus describes the women's terrified expectations in view of the slavery in Libya too. On the Greek attitude to describe brutal and violent characterization to the barbarians vd. the preliminary remarks of DE ROMILLY 1994, pp. 187-196.

39 The sources often bring out some disappointments for certain brutal behaviours: on "public opinion" about the defeated treatment vd. DUCREY 1999, pp. 315-330. The problem of this mainstream violence during these situations is strictly linked with the concept of genocide: cf. KONSTAN 2007, pp. 170-187; VAN WEES 2010, pp. 239-258; VAN WEES 2016, pp. 19-37.

40 On the outcomes of sieges as a "natural motivators that would bring people together" vd. SCHOFIELD 2023, p. 46.

## Women's involvement during urban warfare

The predominant portrayal of women's active involvement in urban warfare often centres around the act of throwing roof tiles. However, it is essential to recognise that this interpretation is more common among scholars and reflects conventional academic narrative rather than a systematic and overriding theme found in historical sources. Scholars tend to stress or downplay the effectiveness of women in repelling the enemies<sup>41</sup>, yet assumptions that women could or could not repel the enemy's advance is rooted in contemporary reading. The sporadic references to roof tile throwing in ancient historians' narratives should prompt contemporary readers to evaluate the women's military contribution with caution. Even if throwing roof tiles could be standard in several urban warfare scenarios, ancient historians might not have deemed it necessary to report such scenarios unless they took an expected turn. Alternatively, we intend to approach the matter of women's military agency by reviewing the narratives of this unusual contribution.

Despite its temporal distance from the period in question, the narrative of Pyrrhus' death represents a prototypical example<sup>42</sup>. During the siege of Argos in 272, meanwhile the Epirote king engaged the enemies in the crowded streets, an Argive humbly born struck him with a spear. The king promptly turn his attention to his assailant. However, among a group of women watching the bloody fight, an elderly woman accidentally identified his son. In her apprehension for him, she grasped a roof tile with both hands and hurled it against Pyrrhus, hitting him in the neck; the king fell unconscious and jolted out from the saddle. Moreover, just for the record, the blow was not immediately fatal, as Pyrrhus succumbed at the hand of another soldier. While ascertaining the historical accuracy of these incidents remains an unattainable effort, there is reason to believe that this kind

41 For the quotations of roof tiles' throwing and a clear explanation on the evidence see BETTALLI 1990, p. 219. Modern scholars, however, has followed this schema that emerges in the sources: SCHAPS 1982, pp. 195-196; HARVEY pp. 73-74. The specific account on roof tiles' throwing is BARRY 1996, followed by many further researches: cf. LOMAN 2004, p. 42; KRENTZ 2007, p. 177; STRAUSS 2007, p. 459; WHITEHEAD 2016, p. 297; LUCAS 2021, p. 124 n. 32.

42 PLUT. *Pyrrh.* 34, 2 (cf. POLYAEN. 8, 68). Cf. SCHAPS 1982, p. 195; BARRY 1996, p. 62; WIN-TJES 2019, pp. 181-182.

of indiscriminate death provoked sensation for the Greeks<sup>43</sup>. In his account, Plutarch deliberately stresses some aspects of ambiguity and uncertainty: the humble Argive soldier was unknown and the women were merely spectators of the battle, and, most importantly, the mother, portrayed as old and needing both hands to throw the missile, failed to kill Pyrrhus. It is impossible to quantify how many soldiers were killed in a manner akin to Pyrrhus during the numerous urban fights in the Classical period. However, aside from this oriented description, there is no coincidence that Plutarch, when referring to even the fate of the Spartan Lysander, decries the fateful nature of such deaths, typical during urban warfare with his most dangerous and unpredictable sub-category: siege warfare<sup>44</sup>. Instances in which women randomly killed men likely generated reluctance and discomfort among male historians, making them uncomfortable in addressing such occurrences.

Another episode in which fights spilt out into the city streets, requiring women to engage in moments of defence, is the Selinous siege<sup>45</sup>. Regarding this account, Diodorus outlines three women's activities. Firstly, they supplied food and missiles to the soldiers, prolonging the defence as much as possible. Scholars have underlined this task as customary during every siege, indicating that women participated in military affairs beyond the roof tiles throwing<sup>46</sup>. While we do not intend to dismiss the possibility of this broader task, we are inclined to exercise caution, eschewing sweeping generalizations. It suffices to notice that Diodorus portrayed what happened as a necessary consequence of the dire turn of events. Probably, the

43 A such death strikes the scholars too: cf. WYLIE 1999, p. 313: «Pyrrhus met his end... in ad undignified if not ludicrous fashion» and KRENTZ 2007, p. 177: «In this ignominious way...». Cf. the description of his death by SEKUNDA 2019 p. 23.

44 PLUT. *Comp. Lys and Sull.* 4,3: «ἀλλ' οὗτοι μὲν βασιλέων καὶ στρατηγῶν θάνατον ἀπέθνησκον, Λύσανδρος δὲ πελταστοῦ καὶ προδρόμου δίκην ἀκλεῶς παραναλώσας ἑαυτὸν, ἐμαρτύρησε τοῖς παλαιοῖς Σπαρτιάταις ὅτι καλῶς ἐφυλάττοντο τὰς τειχομαχίας, ἐν αἷς οὐχ ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς μόνον τοῦ τυχόντος, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὑπὸ παιδὸς καὶ γυναικὸς ἀποθανεῖν ἂν συντύχοι πληγέντα τὸν κράτιστον, ὥσπερ τὸν Ἀχιλλέα φασὶν ὑπὸ τοῦ Πάριδος ἐν ταῖς πύλαις ἀναιρεθῆναι». According to the analysis of ARMOSTRONG – TRUNDLE 2019, pp. 3-4, during sieges took place a “fundamental breakdown” of social and political order to the necessity of a total mobilization of population. We think that it is not accident that the Greeks never called the siege “*agon*”, probably because of their perception of asymmetrical and unequal fight. For the pivotal concept of *agon* vd. DAYTON 2006.

45 On this siege vd. RAY 2009, pp. 260-261; EVANS 2013, pp. 93-96. Regarding the Carthaginians' expedition under Hannibal vd. briefly DE VIDO 2013, pp. 26-28; WHITEHEAD 2021, p. 106.

46 CHANIOTIS 2005, pp. 107-108; MORALES 2015 pp. 114-120.



Greeks did not consider the provision of food and arms by women to be always a granted contribution<sup>47</sup>. Secondly, Diodorus indulges in a pivotal comment steeped in the male Greek standpoint: the women set aside their typical feelings of decency and shame, such as their daily social behaviours to assist<sup>48</sup>. Some may object that, during warfare, males did not expect these customary attitudes from the women. However, Diodorus stresses the situation's exceptional nature, stating that the soldiers were so desperate that they sought female cooperation<sup>49</sup>. In a less critical situation, only the male slaves would have aided their masters<sup>50</sup>, while women with the children would likely have been safeguarded, perhaps at home or involved in caring for the wounded. Therefore, we can point out that the women were excluded from the defence, until the besieged fighting on the parapets. Thirdly, when the Iberians breached a section of the city wall, women on the rooftop began to shout, bewildering the defenders. Believing that the wall's defence was compromise, the defenders constructed barricades in the street. At that point, Diodorus does not clearly state whether women's shouting led to the men abandoning a defence that might have held. As a consequence of the decision to leave the parapets, urban warfare ensued, and women played a direct role. Women and children sought refuge on the roof and began to hurl tiles and stones. The Carthaginians, however, could not advance due to the barricades, the narrow streets, and, significantly, their inability to leverage their numerical superiority<sup>51</sup>. Here throwing tiles from the rooftop seemed to impend the invaders, who, nonetheless, did not suffer many casualties and could relieve the exhausted soldiers<sup>52</sup>. Even in

47 We do not share the read of MORALES 2015, p. 117 regarding the women's presence on the wall with the soldiers (cf. MORALES 2019, p. 162), so as the equivocal statement of BARRY 1996, p. 68: «Women might lend assistance by running supplies to the front line». It is far recommended the reading of LOOMAN 2004, pp. 40-41.

48 Diod. 13, 55, 4: «τὴν αἰδῶ καὶ τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς εἰρήνης αἰσχύνῃν παρ' οὐδὲν ἡγούμεναι». As clearly explained by CAIRNS 1993, p. 121, *aidos* helped women to be adherence with the social behaviours, thus it acted as a catalyst of actions especially outside home. Cf. KONSTAN 2007, pp. 93-98.

49 The Diodorus' judgment is clear-cut DIOD. 13, 55, 4: «τοσαύτη κατάπληξις καθειστήκει, ὥστε τὸ μέγεθος τῆς περιστάσεως δεῖσθαι καὶ τῆς παρὰ τῶν γυναικῶν βοηθείας».

50 Here, it is not the place for the debate regarding slaves and war (HUNT 1998). However, their presence was pivotal during urban warfare operations, particularly during sieges: as opposed to GARLAN 1984, pp. 144-145, we share the reading of WHITEHEAD 2016, p. 297.

51 Vd. BAKER 2023, p. 65.

52 DIOD. 13, 56, 8: «οὐ μὴν ἄλλα τοῦ κινδύνου μέχρι δειλῆς παρεκτείνοντος, τοῖς μὲν ἀπὸ τῶν οἰκῶν ἀγωνιζόμενοι ἐνέλιπε τὰ βέλη, τοῖς δὲ Καρχηδονίοις οἱ διαδεχόμενοι τοὺς κακοπαθοῦντας ἀκέραιοι



this scenario, the women's contact with warfare remained vertical, allowing them to maintain a safe distance, and we cannot assess the effectiveness of throwing despite the help they provided. Yet, as it is evident from the whole account, women only participated when absolutely unavoidable.

To understand how sources typically outline women's military involvement, it is important to review what happened at Plataea, the deadlock that triggered off the Peloponnesian War, as well as a clear example of urban warfare<sup>53</sup>. On a moonless, rain-soaked, night, a fifth column opened the city gates to allow three hundred Thebans - the long-standing enemy of Athens' ally - to enter. As the Thebans gathered in the square, it became evident that there were fewer more than it was expected; in response, the Plataeans started to barricade the streets with the wagons, and implement other countermeasures. Once the preparations were complete, the assaults began. After not long the situation took a turn, thus the Thebans initiated an hasty flee in the streets. At that point, the women, along with the slaves, shouted and hurled stones - an action we had observed to become feasible only when the war was rife in the city. Some scholars have pointed out how, in this case, women were decisive and strategically positioned according to a peculiar plan: the Plataeans placed them on rooftops as part of a defensive plan<sup>54</sup>. This means that the Plataeans cut their women in on the defence. However, Thucydides highlights some natural elements, such as the darkness, rain, along with the countermeasures implemented by the defenders<sup>55</sup>. Moreover, the pre-blocked streets played a pivotal role in the Thebans finding themselves in unfamiliar terrain. At the same time, they were pursued by an enemy that was an obvious expert of the Platae-

δηγωνίζοντο». For the replacement of the exhausted soldiers vd. SINCLAIR 1966, pp. 249-255.

53 Thuc., 2, 2-6. Cf. LOSADA 1972, pp. 60-62; PRANDI 1988, pp. 92-102; BUCK 1994, pp. 13-14; STAHL 2002, pp. 65-74.

54 The prime follower of this reading is MORALES 2015, p. 113, who has underlined a verb employed by Aineias (AEN. TACT. 2, 3), τεχνάζουσι, arguing that the choice of placing women on the rooftop was part of an organized plan, but the text is talking about the holes in the houses' walls so as the Thebans could not see the Plataeans' movements: AEN. TACT. 2, 4: «Τεχνάζουσιν οὖν εὐθὺς τοιόνδε... οἱ δὲ παρήγγελον κρύφα τοῖς ἄλλοις πολίταις σποράδην μὲν ἐκ τῶν οἰκίων μὴ ἐξιέναι κτλ.». After having reported the accomplishment of the countermeasures (Ετοίμασθέντος δὲ πλήθους ἀξιομάχου τὰς μὲν διόδους καὶ τὰς ῥύμας ἐτύφλωσαν ἀμάξαις ἄνευ ὑποζυγίων, ἀπὸ δὲ σημείου ἀθροισθέντες ἐφέροντο ἐπὶ τοὺς Θηβαίους), moreover the author (AEN. TACT. 2, 4) reports the women's participation in this way: «Ἄμα δὲ τοῦτοις τὰ γυναῖκα καὶ οἱ οἰκέται ἦσαν ἐπὶ τοῖς κεράμοις». The use of ἄμα seems to suggest that this women action was unrelated with the Plataeans' countermeasures.

55 These elements are highlighted in the account of LENDON 2010, pp. 108-113

an streets. In this occasion, women are not portrayed as decisive figures, neither in the account of Aeneas Tacticus<sup>56</sup>. Their military contribution remains challenging to assess, and, as noted, they were physically distant from the danger again<sup>57</sup>. However, their kind of shout, which probably provoked panic among the Thebans, deserves some attention. Instead of choosing a verb related with a war cry, Thucydides opted for ὀλολυγή, the performative female ritual cry<sup>58</sup>. Even the voice is outlined away from the male cries executed in military operations.

The other side of urban warfare, in its internecine facet, the *stasis*, needs a distinct investigation. When conflicts arose among factions that were fracturing the home front, unless there was a threat to the community's survival, it is questionable whether the Greeks, according to their point of view, deemed female involvement as necessary. Besides, civil strife was a citizens' business, so we should scrutinise the sources circumspectly: accounts dealing with women during *stasis* are relatively scarce<sup>59</sup>. In this context, the *stasis* that raged in the streets of Corcyra stands out one of the most handbook episode in the Thucydidean narrative<sup>60</sup> as wells as the only occasion in which women engaged actively in the fight. According to the painstaking description provided by the Athenian historian, as the factions were boldly challenged in the streets, women were aligned with the demos, and they hurled roof tiles from the rooftop. Nevertheless, Thucydides portrays them as behaving bravely and, most importantly, he remarks that they displayed a valour that was contrary to their nature<sup>61</sup>. This observation

56 Despite the author's notoriety for highlighting the social and folkloristic matters, as rightly noted by BETTALLI 2017 p. 167, Aeneas is still underestimate for his military value. BETTALLI 1990 p. 219 has underlined how here Aineias stresses the wagon's role to put the emphasis of the urban places' control.

57 Given the importance to women's duties at war, BARRY 1996, p. 68 has been obliged to admit: «only rarely did they actually engage in violence». It is surprising how sometimes scholars (HORNBLOWER 2007, p. 43) have called the women "fighters", when they were non-combatants by definition, as has pointed out now by MORALES 2019, p. 28.

58 The distinction between the male paean and the female ὀλολυγή is well-described with many references by MCCLURE 2009, pp. 53-54).

59 During the well-known *stasis* at Athens in the 404, meanwhile the men were involved in the civil war, the women stayed at home (XEN. *Mem.* 2, 7, 2-3).

60 The bibliography on the Corcyra's civil strife is boundless and this is not the place to deal with. For the careful analysis cf. INTRIERI 2002; FANTASIA 2008, pp. 167-201. Cf. recently PALMER 2017, pp. 409-414.

61 THUC. 2 74, 1: «αἱ τε γυναῖκες αὐτοῖς τολμηρῶς ξυνεπελάβοντο βάλλουσαι ἀπὸ τῶν οἰκῶν τῷ κεράμῳ καὶ παρὰ φύσιν ὑπομένουσαι τὸν θόρυβον». The most problematic matter is the expression παρὰ φύσιν, that is analysed by MORALES 2015, pp. 67-73. KEARNS 1990, p. 339 and WINTJES 2019, p.

implies that Thucydides connotes such behaviour as a deviation from the Greek expectation. It goes without saying that Thucydides comes from a deeply rooted male society where such chauvinist attitudes were commonplace. Moreover, according to his cultural background, the conceptualisation of valour is strictly embedded in masculinity<sup>62</sup>. Thus, if we consider this statement as a sort of admiration for women by Thucydides, we may be projecting contemporary views onto his work<sup>63</sup>. Instead, following the Thucydidean narrative of the *stasis*, the women involvement with this male characterisation seems to be the perfect accomplishment of a perturbing overturning into the community<sup>64</sup>.

## Conclusions

Returning to the questions posed at the beginning of this study, we would like to give a rundown of the several features that emerged in the previous pages. Firstly, from Homer to the later authors, sources follow the same line: the Greeks perceived women and warfare completely at odds according to their worldview. Even when the war occurred close to the inner part of the city, women could be compelled to engage in warfare, albeit with some limitations. They always kept a considerable vertical distance when they were onlookers as well as they hurled tiles and stones from the rooftops. Regarding this last involvement, which arose out of necessity due to the expected enslavement and other violences, it is impossible to achieve a real balance of their military effectiveness by the limited knowledge from the sources. Ancient historians always outlined the women's agency ac-

185 have noted that Thucydides is stressing through an elaboration the level of women's intervention. This reading is reported by HORNBLOWER 1991, p. 473 without taking side on the topic. Rather than the valour or the impetus (τολμηρῶς), usually *sophrosyne* was up to women: RADEMAKER 2005, pp. 1-40 and *passim*. For the contraposition between the male ἀνδρεία and the female σωφροσύνη vd. PAYEN 2012, pp. 227-228.

62 According to LORAUX 1985, p. 18, Thucydides show how the civil strife altered the concept of valour. As well known, the idea of valour is closely connected with the maleness: vd. BASSI 2003, pp. 25-52.

63 Some scholars have got this Thucydidean remark as an appreciation of their courage: HARVEY 1985, p. 83 has talked about: "a tight-lipped judgment", cf. MORALES 2015, p. 113.

64 Vd. WIEDEMANN 1983, p. 169. When Thucydides talks about τολμηρῶς ξυνεπελάβοντο and παρὰ φύσιν ὑπομένουσιν τὸν θόρυβον regarding the women behaviour, we should consider that the historian is portraying a degenerate city where THUC. 3, 83,1: «Οὕτω πᾶσα ἰδέα κατέστη κακοτροπίας».

according to their male outlook, and if they performed some noteworthy act, regardless, the sources felt discomfit to touch on. Thus, it is likely that, even so, during desperate emergencies such as urban warfare, towards women, the Greeks were used to call upon women to adhere to behaviours that were socially accepted. Even in situations such as sieges, which could unsettle the habitual social order, Greeks continued to delineate women's agency by their cultural viewpoint and prevailing societal norms.

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