Sources for Ancient Warfare

HPAH 5044/6044 – ARMIES AND NAVIES: STUDIES IN ANCIENT WARFARE

Sources

- This module covers Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic warfare
- The sources for these periods are diverse and include everything from Homer to inscriptions
- Warfare touches essentially all aspects of Greek life and thus information on it can be found in various settings and types of sources

800 BCE – 200 BCE

The historical literary sources

- The historical sources, Herodotos, Thucydides, Xenophon and Diodoros, provide information on warfare, tactics and the socio-political circumstances of warfare.
- They provide information and description of battles and campaigns.
- However, their usability as sources for Greek warfare depends on the author.
  - For example, neither Herodotos not Diodoros were soldiers or generals themselves and also they did not witness the events they describe.
  - On the other hand, both Thucydides and Xenophon were experienced generals and had a great knowledge of warfare.

The historical literary sources

- Who is more useful?
  - The source that has a lot of knowledge but assumes the audience has knowledge too?
  - Or, the source that has little knowledge and assumes that the reader has little knowledge too?

- Associated reading: Thucydides, Book 4.

Poets and Playwrights

- Information about warfare can also be gleaned from poetry and drama.
- Homer is our greatest source for early archaic warfare but it is a source with a myriad problems.
- Poets, especially of the archaic period, such as Alkaios, Tyrtaios and Archilochos can also provide information on warfare.
- Attic drama and particularly comedy (Aristophanes) also provides information, although mainly on the political and social side of warfare.

Poets and Playwrights

- To think about:
  - How problematic can poetic language be for understanding specifics of Greek warfare?
  - Particularly in translation…
  - SO: how do you minimise this problem?

- Associated reading: Tyrtaeus' *Elegies* with Luginbill, R.D. 2002, 'Tyrtaeus 12 West: Come Join the Spartan Army'. *Classical Quartely,* vol. 52, issue 2, pp. 405-415.

Epigraphy

- Epigraphy is useful in the study of some aspects of Greek warfare.
- There are lists of casualties from different campaigns.
- There are also lists of ephebes that have gone through their military training.
- There are lists of ships and equipments from some of the great naval powers of the Mediterranean, such as Athens.
- Epigraphy can provide us with data, but interpretation is critical!

Epigraphy

- To think about:
  - What are the problems with using inscriptions?
  - How much information can you actually glean from an inscription?
  - How can you use this information in conjunction with other sources?

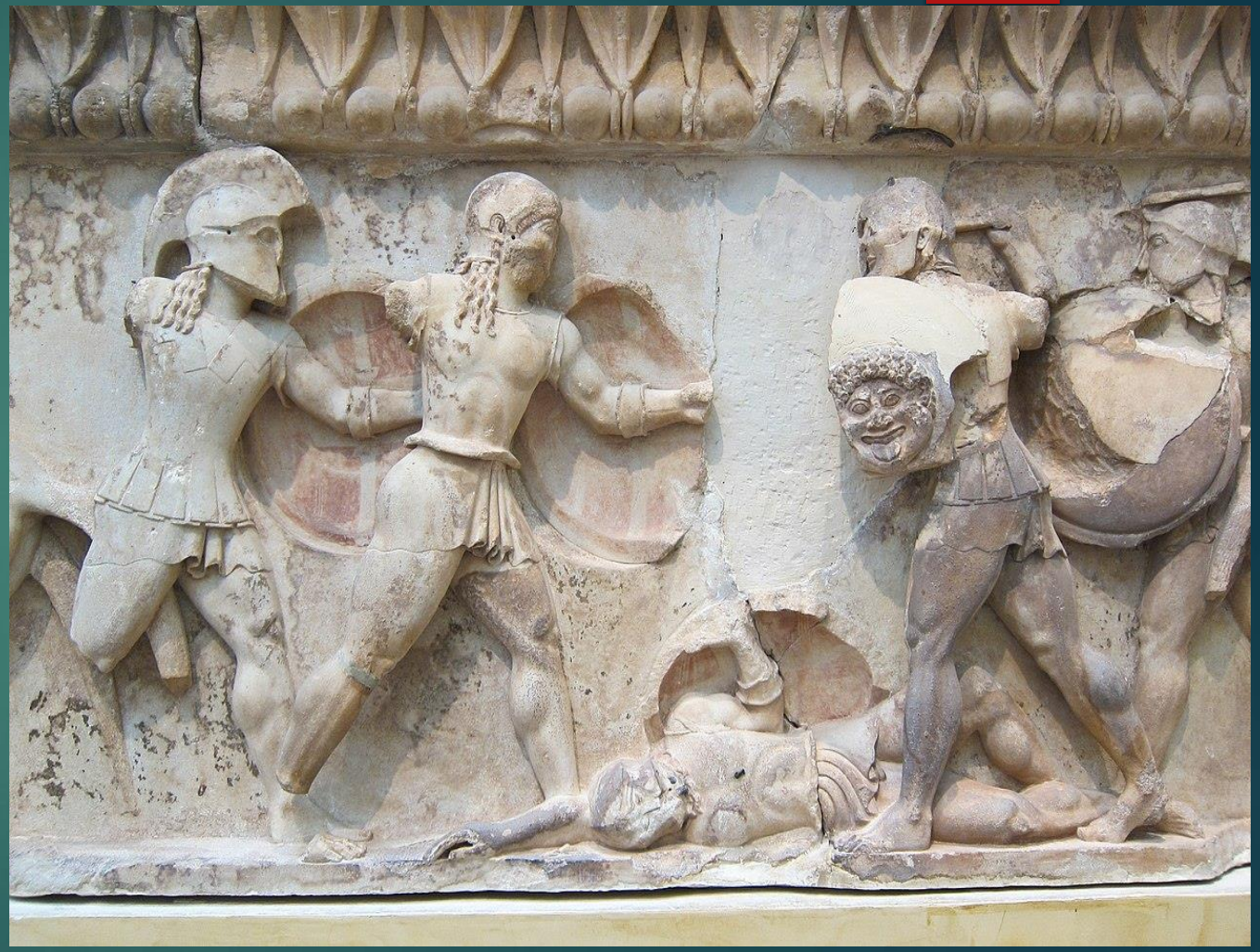
- FYI, Wikipedia has a list of various online resources for finding Greek inscriptions: Greek inscriptions - Wikipedia.

- Associated reading: Bodel, J. (ed.) 2001, *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*. London – New York: Routledge (esp. first chapter).

OGIS 237, 196-194 BCE. Image from British Museum: stela | British Museum. Text and translation (English and Italian): PHRC043 : Decree of the city of Iasos establishing cultic honours for King Antiochos III and Queen Laodike - Karia (196-194 BC) Decree.

Iconography

- Vase-paintings, reliefs, sculpture and types on coins provide us with a multitude of information on warfare.
- That includes not only the social aspects of warfare, such as the myriad scenes of the soldier's farewell but also specific information on the techniques of fighting, both individually and in cohorts.
- However, such material are art and as such they need to be viewed with a critical eye.



Siphnian Treasury, Delphi, 6th cent BCE depiction of Trojan War

Iconography

- To think about:
  - What can you gain by using iconographic evidence?
  - What are the problems with iconography?
  - What are the differences in approach between using a vase-painting and a temple frieze?
  - Who decides and who executes art?

- Further info on Siphnian Treasury: Siphnian Treasury, Delphi (video) | Khan Academy.

Archaeology

- Archaeology is particularly useful when researching the practicalities of warfare and particularly equipment.
- Our main source of information about armour and its evolution comes from buried or dedicated weapons and armour.
- Similarly underwater archaeology has revealed a lot about ships and particularly about the rams of triremes.

Archaeology

- To think about:
- What types of archaeological evidence can help you with studying warfare?
- What are the problems?

- Additional reading: Jonathan Prag lecture on 3rd cent BCE rams in Sicily (on moodle)

Task

- In groups, analyse the source on your handout.
- Think of it in terms of gobbet practice!

- To think about with all sources:
  - What are the issues with these sources?
  - What do they tell you about Greek warfare?
  - What are the problems?
  - What do you need to do in order to use them wisely?

Beyond the sources

OTHER THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Warfare and the Greeks

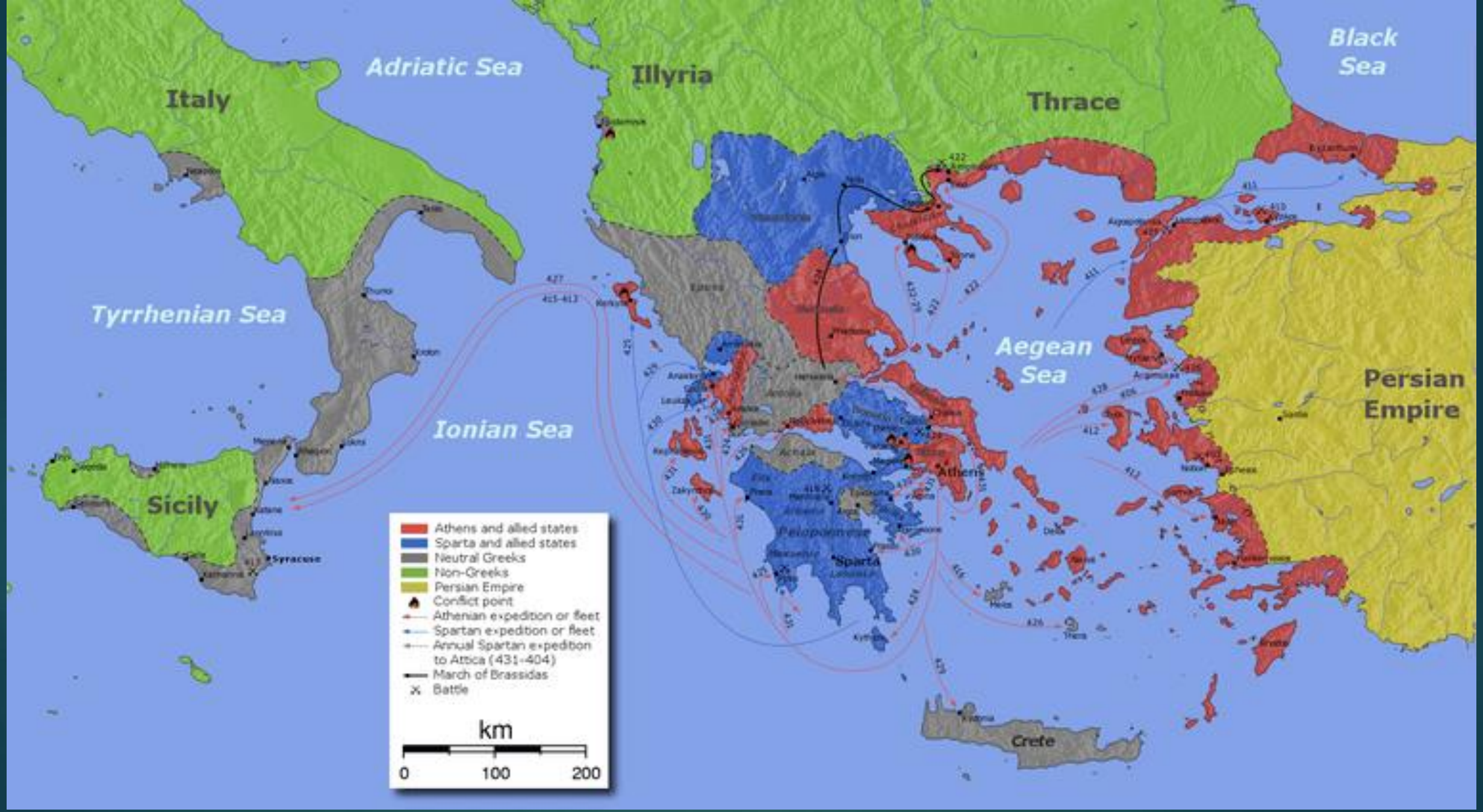
- The Greek world was a world of war.
- Not only the great wars, such as the Persian Wars or the Peloponnesian War but also smaller conflicts between neighbours.
- Every polis had an army and every polis experienced fighting in a smaller or larger scale.
- Many poleis had a navy, which was sometimes sent to join other navies
- Most poleis had some kind of defensive building, e.g. acropolis, walls, towers.

Borders and Resources

- There were about 1,500 Greek poleis around the Mediterranean in the archaic and classical periods.
- The vast majority of them were in clusters and often shared a border with one or more poleis.
- Particularly in Greece, Asia Minor and Sicily/Magna Graecia friction between poleis was essentially for land and resources.
- The hunt for an extra portion of fertile land, good harbours and pastureland can be found in the base of the majority of border conflicts in the Greek world.

War and Imperialism

- Imperialism, or poleis trying for dominion over their neighbours, their region or even a part of the wider Greek world, was also a cause for war.
- Poleis like Athens or Sparta, especially in the classical period, warred with one another, made expeditions in other parts of the Greek world and had to put down revolts of recalcitrant 'allies'.
- For smaller poleis, these larger conflicts for hegemony often meant that they were sucked in the maelstrom of warfare to guard the security of their borders or fight on the side of, or against, their hegemon.
- E.g. Second Peloponnesian War…


Adriatic Sea
Italy
Illyria
Thrace
Black Sea
Tyrrhenian Sea
Ionian Sea
Aegean Sea
Persian Empire
Sicily
Syracuse
Athens
Sparta
Peloponnese
Crete
Athens and allied states
Sparta and allied states
Neutral Greeks
Non-Greeks
Persian Empire
Conflict point
Athenian expedition or fleet
Spartan expedition or fleet
Annual Spartan expedition to Attica (431-404)
March of Brasidas
Battle
km
0
100
200

Greeks and non-Greeks

- A great part of warfare in the Greek world was between Greeks and non-Greeks.
- For some Greeks, non-Greeks were far away, yet for many poleis the conflict was closer to home, since they shared a border with non-Greek tribes or kingdoms.
- Also, especially in the archaic period, the Greeks themselves in their process of expansion over the Mediterranean came in conflict with tribes and kingdoms whose territories they invaded.

- E.g. *RO* 17 (387/6 BCE) – people of Erythrai concerned about being given up to the 'barbarians' and appeal to Athens.

Geography and warfare

- The Mediterranean is a land of contradictions.
- It has a difficult terrain that cannot be categorised in any easy way.
- There are high mountains, ragged hills, large flat plains, small and large rivers.
- It is also a region intimately connected with the sea.
- Thus, for most poleis, diverse forces were necessary to successfully attack or defend.

Geography and soldiers

- Geography was one of the main concerns regarding the choice and use of troop types.
- The heavy infantry (hoplites) struggled in very rugged or forested terrain.
- Similarly for cavalry. Both these troop types were most useful on the flat plains.
- Hoplites could also be used to defend or attack mountain passes (think of Thermopylae).

Border of Attika from the North

Warfare ancient and modern

- In today's world warfare is essentially distant.
- Our weapons and tactics are suited for distant warfare and thus not for hand-to-hand combat.
- Thus modern warfare is more mobile, less dependent on individual strength and prowess on the battlefield and more concerned with overall strategies.
- Ancient warfare was very different, more tactile and more dependent upon individual conduct and specific battle tactics rather than overall strategies.

Battlefield reality

- Ancient warfare was brutal, inhumane and indescribably messy.
- Edged weapons are rather horrible instruments and make for equally horrible wounds.
- Most importantly, unlike modern warfare, the ancient soldier would have to experience the pain, wounding and death not only of comrades but also of enemies.
- While we can to an extent understand ancient tactics, do not make the mistake of assuming that we can understand the realities of ancient warfare.

Depicting ancient warfare

- Ancient warfare for us is a distant experience.
- The specifics are hazy or are reduced to words on paper.
- Even re-enactment, doning armour or fencing does not compensate for the reality of warfare.
- The reality of battle is not something we can experience and making assumptions can be very problematic

Warm libraries and modern scholarship

- No modern scholar has had experience of ancient warfare.
- The majority of modern scholars have had no experience of modern warfare either.
- Scholarship is essentially a theoretical field.

Things to think about

- It is essential to put Greek warfare in context.
- It is necessary to be very careful when dealing with the different types of sources, their strengths and weaknesses.
- Be very careful of accepting modern arguments without recourse to ancient sources and thinking very carefully about them.
- Avoid the trap of idealisation, ancient or modern.

Plan (delete)

- Intro course – module descrp, structure (their choice)
- Assessments
- Me + details, working pattern
- At end of world of the polis slides, could do which passage stood out to you from Sage and why?

Further reading

- Thomas, R. 2000, *Herodotus in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 257-269.