

Owen Rees, *Military Departures, Homecomings and Death in Classical Athens: Hoplite Transitions*. London: Bloomsbury. 2022. Pp. [x] + 252. \$115.00. ISBN 978-1350188648 (hardback).

With this book, Rees aims to do two things. First, he seeks to reorient the “ancient PTSD debate,” hinging on whether there is such a thing as the “universal soldier” and to what extent ancient and modern soldiers are vulnerable to the same kinds of traumas. Jonathan Shay linked experiences in the Vietnam War to the accounts of war and combat trauma in works like the *Iliad*.¹ Jason Crowley, on the other hand, argued that such comparisons are misleading given how different ancient and modern societies are with respect to warfare. Athenian hoplites did not have to navigate a divide between military and civilian life and thus were not (or not nearly as) susceptible to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).² Rees argues that there was in fact a clear separation between military and domestic spheres in Classical Athens, which should force a reconsideration of ancient PTSD.

Second, Rees wants to uncover the details of soldiers going off to war and coming back from it, to lay bare what one of my graduate professors called “real Greece.” Behind the Periclean Funeral Oration and white ground lekythoi were the kinds of routine matters traditional sources tend to overlook or simply assume. How were Athenian soldiers called up for a campaign? Where did they muster? How much fuel did it take to cremate the war dead on the battlefield, and what were the logistical constraints in bringing mortal remains home? Rees succeeds more in the pursuit of this second aim than the first, but the illumination of the real experiences of Athenian soldiers, their families, and their community makes this book a valuable contribution to ancient history.

Following the first chapter’s detailed introduction to the topic, Chapter 2, “The Warrior’s Departure,” considers the soldier leaving his household, primarily through the medium of departure scenes on painted pottery. Some visual evidence suggests that various rituals were performed within the household prior to departure, which Rees takes to signify a boundary being crossed. The soldier does not merely leave the *oikos* physically; he is separated conceptually from the household and his individuality when he joins the collective identity of the army. Chapter 5, “The Warrior’s Homecoming,” returns to the evidence of pottery to argue that some departure scenes are in fact arrival scenes. Rees’s discussion (83–87) of two red figure *pelikai* showing two similar scenes, which he argues depict a departure and a later arrival of the same hoplite (instead of two departures), is an insightful addition to the scholarship on these vases. In Rees’s scheme, just as a warrior’s household performs rituals when he departs, it does so again

¹ Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York 1994).

² Jason Crowley, *The Psychology of the Athenian Hoplite: The Culture of Combat in Classical Athens* (Cambridge 2012).

upon his reintegration to the family. Both discussions are supplemented with a range of literary sources, including the departure of Hector from Andromache in *Iliad* 6 and the return of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' tragedy.

Chapters 3 and 4, "The Military Departure" and "Military Homecoming," respectively, work as a pair. The soldier did not only leave from and return to his household. He also left and reentered the city as part of the army. Rees asks how citizens were summoned to service, and where armies gathered. He contends that the deme was the first point of muster, and that the Lyceum was an ideal location for the entire force to gather. Upon returning, some spots, including the Piraeus, were obvious points of first contact with the city, and a collective cleansing ritual might have taken place before the soldiers returned to their own private affairs. The rituals, spaces, and individual-collective dichotomy of the departure to and return from war all hint at clearly demarcated boundaries between home and military life. The transition, in other words, was not a seamless one, according to Rees.

Chapter 7, "Military Homecoming of the Dead," contains some of the most informative and useful parts of the book. Rees explores the macabre realities facing armies dealing with the war dead, including the acts of cremation and bringing remains back to Athens. These "cremains" could have been quite voluminous, posing a perhaps insurmountable logistical challenge. The remains brought out for the funeral oration and public burial in the Kerameikos as part of the *patrios nomos*, therefore, might have been incomplete, only token parts taken from the cremation pyre.

Chapter 8, "The Domestic Reception of the War Dead," covers the well-trodden ground of the interplay between public and private honoring of the dead in Athens.³ The bodies buried in the *dēmosion sēma* were never returned to their families, so the families had to be content with private rituals that symbolically returned the dead to the *oikos*. Rees takes a harder line than most in terms of how radically the democracy wrested the care of the dead from families. He compares this assertion of control on the part of the polis to the torture of Tantalus (126). Families could see the boxes in which their loved ones were carried, but they were prevented from getting close enough to touch the remains and express their personal grief in accustomed ways. Following this chapter, a brief conclusion ties the work together, and urges a reopening of the "PTSD debate."

Rees tends to treat Classical Athens and the evidence it produced as free of change and development. Rees acknowledges (114) that much ink has been spilled regarding when the *patrios nomos* was introduced and whether its rituals took shape gradually. Classical Athenian practices, however, are presented as if they were the same across the entire period and at every occasion. Likewise, there is scant discussion about development in vase painting, or how different vase shapes and contexts for their use

³ For the Archaic period, see Cezary Kucewicz, *The Treatment of the War Dead in Archaic Athens: An Ancestral Custom* (London 2020); for the Classical period, see Nathan Arrington, *Ashes, Images, and Memories: The Presence of the War Dead in Fifth-Century Athens* (Oxford 2015).

and final deposition bear on the images represented (aside from some cursory remarks on the funerary nature of lekythoi, 22). Rees admits that the imagery on such vases might not be a direct reflection of real life, but argues that these objects serve as “an outlet for a visual-mental construction of a society’s experience of war” (18). Would a vase from an Athenian funerary context necessarily convey the same visual-mental construction as one produced for export to Italy? Rees’s overall analysis would also benefit from the consideration of wealth and status. For instance, the examples of private commemorations Rees adduces are from wealthy families able to commission expensive monuments such as the reliefs for Dexileos and Demokleides (130–137). What the majority of Athenian families did to reclaim their deceased soldiers is left obscure by the evidence discussed.

The fact that families poured libations at the leaving and (maybe) returning of soldiers, and that there were formal procedures and places of muster and dismissal, is not enough to demonstrate the existence of strict conceptual boundaries between home life and military campaign. A society in which all of life was pervaded by religious rituals and sacred spaces, fathers passed down hoplite arms to sons, and military service was one of many public duties, does not necessarily need a distinction between “civilian” and “soldier.” Yet I learned a lot from this book, and now think about Greek warfare in a deeper and more nuanced way. Thanks to Rees, I will no longer take for granted the awful reality of soldiers dealing with the corpses of their comrades, and the hubbub around Attica as messengers went from deme to deme to call Athenian men to muster for war.

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