

# AW

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## A FEAST FOR DOGS & CROWS

*The aftermath of battle*

THEME - GERMANIC POST-BATTLE SACRIFICE // AUGUSTUS' TROPHIES // WAR-DEAD IN GREECE  
SPECIALS - PRAETORIAN GUARD DURING THE ROMAN REPUBLIC // WHAT WAS A CUNEUS?

## War booty in ancient Greece

# THE SPOILS OF WAR

War for the ancient Greeks was a common occurrence. For civilians, war was an unstable mixture of hardship, including the risk of being robbed by passing armies. For those who served their city or king, battle meant the risk of getting wounded or killed in single combat or in the claustrophobic shuffle of phalanx formations. Survivors would be faced with the devastations of the battlefield. Here, on the fields on which the slaughter of the day had ended, the victorious side would search and collect clothing, armour, weaponry, and other valuables from the bodies of friend and foe alike.

By Friedrich Wilhelm Miesien

In our modern view, looting the corpse of a fallen enemy is considered an act of savagery and disrespect to the dead adversary. For the ancient Greeks, the situation was different. Acquiring booty from slain enemies and bringing it home was considered proof of a warrior's prowess and valour, was used as a grateful offering to the gods, displayed in one's hometown to celebrate victory and in many cases more profoundly an opportunity to replace or upgrade one's own war gear. In this article, we will take a look at the current knowledge on this quite neglected aspect of battle and its meaning in ancient Greek culture, and also investigate some quite spectacular artefacts that have survived due to this common Greek practice.

### Written sources

Information about the looting of fallen enemies can be found in written accounts. Herodotus reports of the Phocceans dedicating two thousand shields taken from the Thessalians and offered at the sanctuaries of Delphi and Abae around 480 BC (Hdt. 8.27.4). Another case can be found in the work of Plutarch who mentions the enor-

mous amounts of Arms and armour taken by Timoleon's men from their Carthaginian enemies at the Battle of Crimisus in 341/40 BC, of which 1000 armours and 10000 shields were sanctified in the temples of Syracuse and Corinth (*Timoleon* 29.3–6).

A similarly stunning account is passed down to us by Arrian in his *Anabasis*, describing how Alexander himself after the victory in the Battle of Granicus ordered 300 suits of Persian armour to Athens to dedicate them to Athena (Arrian, *Anabasis* 1.16.7). The amount of captured armour itself is already impressive, but Alexander did not stop there. He ordered these items to be inscribed as follows: "Alexander, son of Philip, and all the Greeks except the Lacedaimonians, present this offering from the spoils taken from the foreigners inhabiting Asia." This inscription is both a religious dedication as well as a statement towards all those who did not support Alexander's efforts. The Spartans refused to support Alexander's campaign against Persia, a serious offence not to be forgotten by the young ambitious king. However, instead of dispatching a punitive expedition against the Spartans, he chose a more severe form of punishment: shaming his antagonists in front of gods and men.

### Dedication of arms and armour

Originally, Greeks seem to have taken arms and armour only as trophies, or for their personal use. Dedications to the gods, however, are rarely seen in the archaeological record before the eighth century BC. Until then, there are only a few artefacts from Miletus and Philia that appear to have been used as offerings. A more solid number of artefacts dates back to the Late Geometric era, and extensive finds are available from the Archaic period. By then, dedication of war booty seems to have been a significant cultural trait. In many cases, pieces that have survived to this day have been inscribed with either only the god to whom it was dedicated or a longer inscription stating from whom it was taken and which city or individual offered it to the gods. In some rare cases objects were simply inscribed to celebrate a great victory and put on display in public locations. A quite extensive number of helmets unearthed in the sanctuary of Olympia, however, are missing any inscription, but are ritually damaged (e.g. by bending the nose guard outwards on Corinthian helmets). Some of these relics are important proofs for battles that are sometimes only known from contemporary written accounts without knowledge of the exact place it was fought.

The dedication of spoils witnessed its heyday in the Archaic and Classical periods. Nevertheless, judging from the archaeological situation, there was a decrease in dedications towards the end of the Classical period. Alexander the Great revived this custom in order to present himself publicly as a victorious conqueror. It is no surprise that some of his successors tried to emulate him by donating their own loot. However, the overall amount of sanctified objects from the Hellenistic period is by far smaller and dedications appear to have ceased not much later.

There are not only differences between the different periods, but also between the many regions of the Hellenic world. The core region for the dedication of arms and armour was the Greek mainland with its Panhellenic

sanctuaries in Olympia, Delphi, and Isthmia. According to Plutarch, the Spartans were the exception, believing that captured equipment was taken from cowards, and therefore unfit to be presented to the gods (Plutarch, *Moralia* 224B–F). The eastern Greeks appear to have attached less value to this custom, as there are fewer examples of dedicated war gear that have been unearthed there. In contrast to the mainland and the eastern part of the Hellenic world, sanctification of loot was uncommon in Italy until the Greek colonization. Originally, Italic warriors were buried with their war gear and spoils were mainly taken as personal trophies or for reuse. This changed later and we have written sources stating that the Samnites displayed Roman armour and standards, which were later retaken by the Romans, who themselves used captured Samnite armour and shields to adorn temples and public places (Livy 9.15 and 10.46). The Greek colonies in Italy themselves sent most of their dedications to the sanctuaries of the mainland with which they still felt connected.

### Examples of finds

There is a great number of finds from Greek cities and sanctuaries all over the Mediterranean associated with war booty. Almost every part of a warrior's kit could and was dedicated. Out of a wide range of artefacts, we will now focus our attention on two outstanding objects. Our first object is a bronze shield (*aspis*) facing taken from the Spartans in the Battle of Sphacteria 425/4. This artefact is an outstanding example of archaeological proof for a famous ancient battle.

At Sphacteria, a small island in the bay of Pylos in the Peloponnese, Spartan troops were defeated, and for the first time the supposedly invincible Spartan hoplite had to surrender to mere peltasts. The surrender of the Spartan troops was so surprising, that the Athenians decided to display the men who surrendered as well as some of the most expensive captured war gear in public in order to shame their enemy. This bronze shield facing, discovered by American archaeologists in a cistern in the Agora of Athens in



*Detail of a relief from the treasury of the Sicyonians at Delphi. This scene depicts a mythological cattle raid. The treasury was intended to house valuables, so depicting a raid like this may not have been unintentional.*

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**The head of a battering ram of the fifth century BC unearthed at Olympia and currently on display at the local museum.**

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1936 is an amazing find, not only because it is one of the best preserved shield facings in the world, but especially because of its unique historical context. On the bronze bowl that once reinforced a wooden core, an inscription reads, "The Athenians from the Lacedaemonians at Pylos". This shield was most probably put up for display in the Agora until it was buried at the beginning of the third century BC. Another interesting feature is the fact that the inscription does not dedicate this object to the gods, but merely celebrates the defeat the Spartans suffered at the hands of the Athenian soldiers.

There are important examples of objects from the borders of the Hellenic world, especially from the contact zones with other cultures, that have been brought to the important sanctuaries of Greece. One such object is an Etruscan bronze helmet of the Negau type that has been unearthed in Olympia together with two additional helmets with similar inscriptions. The Etruscans interacted and competed with the Greeks in the western Mediterranean. Armed conflict on land and at sea was not uncommon. The city of Cumae, originally founded by Greeks from Euboea in the eighth century BC, was the first Greek colony on Italian soil. Situated on Italy's west coast, it was quite close to the sphere of influence of the Etruscan cities and surrounded by Oscan peoples. Conflict was inevitable. During its history, Cumae experienced many armed conflicts until its Greek period finally ended in the late fifth century BC, when Samnites tore down its walls.

The Negau helmet, however, is a witness to the naval Battle of Cumae fought in 474 BC by a combined navy from Syracuse and Cumae against a southern Etruscan fleet. Hieron I, the tyrant of Syracuse, and his ally Aristodemus, tyrant of Cumae, defeated the Etruscan fleet and ended the Etruscan expansion towards the south of Italy. In order to celebrate this victory, Hieron I sent these helmets to one of the most important sanctuaries of the Greek world, Olympia, where they were put on display in the hippodrome. The inscription on this helmet, in contrast to the Spartan shield, has been composed by

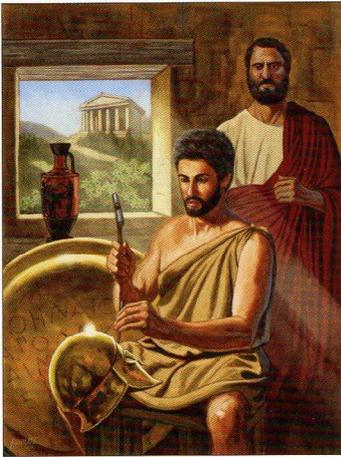
embossing curves and lines in order to create the letters needed. The text reads: "Hieron, son of Deinomenes, and the Syracusans to Zeus from the Etruscans of Cumae." In this particular case, we do have a religious dedication to Zeus and we actually know who offered it and from which people it was taken, making it a very precious artefact regarding ancient Greek military history.

As we have seen from written sources and the two artefacts that we have examined closer, taking the armament of a beaten foe was important to the Greeks. Dedicating part of it to the city or the gods was an opportunity to showcase one's commitment to the state and the gratefulness towards divine assistance in the field. For us they are a unique source on Greek military history and the evolution of Greek warfare. **AW**

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#### Further reading

- H. Baitinger, *Waffenweihungen in griechischen Heiligtümern* (Mainz 2011).
- H. Baitinger, 'Sizilisch-unteritalische Funde in griechischen Heiligtümern', *Jahrbuch des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums Mainz* 60.1 (2013), pp. 153–296.
- H. Born, *Die Helme des Hephaistos: Handwerk und Technik griechischer Bronzen in Olympia* (Munich 2009).
- M. Burns, *South-Italic military equipment: The Cultural and Military Significance of the Warrior's Panoply from the Fifth to the Third Centuries BC* (PhD Thesis, Institute of Archaeology, University of Cambridge, 2005).



# IMMORTALIZING VICTORY

Johnny Shumate's cover illustration allows the viewer to observe an interesting step preceding a sanctification ceremony in ancient Greece through the eyes of the victorious donor. Here, in a small blacksmith's workshop close to a sanctuary, an inscription is made on a helmet under the watchful eyes of a priest.

By *Friedrich Wilhelm Miesen*

In the background of Johnny Shumate's illustration is a hoplite's shield with an already finished engraving, hinting that the dedication includes a complete panoply. The shield is inspired by a find from Olympia. Greek craftsmen were skilful masters in working bronze, including the production of fine decorative art and, of course, inscriptions.

To make these inscriptions, they used a variety of techniques and tools. Both decorations and inscriptions could be cut into the metal surface with needles by chasing a design sketched directly on the object, chiselled using fine gouges, or countered on with single point punches. Usually the patterns and letters had to be composed by striking the object with the tool several times. In this manner, the craftsmen would inscribe the captured objects with small texts, complete sentences, or sometimes just the names of the donor or the god to whom it would be dedicated. Letter punches, as we know them from modern-day hardware stores, were not in use.

Archaeologists have uncovered a wide variety of inscribed objects in many sanctuaries of the ancient Greek world.

With the exception of sword blades, nearly all parts of the Greek panoply could be inscribed before being offered to the gods as a gift of gratefulness for a victory, or simply for surviving a battle. Some of the helmet and weapons would additionally be damaged in some way in order to prevent re-use by someone who would dare rob the temple. Usually, the dedicated spoils would then be on display in the temples or other public places in sanctuaries or cities, for long periods of time. If space ran out to showcase the items, the objects would be cleaned out and buried nearby, inadvertently creating a treasure trove of information for modern archaeologists!

However, in some cases, these buried caches were later dug up in order to gain access to the valuable bronze for re-use in new objects. Even when captured armour and weapons were gradually replaced by votive bars of bronze equalling the value of such war booty, the smith's work was still demanded, as these bars were inscribed with at least the donor's name.

We do not know the names of the craftsmen who made these inscriptions, nor where they performed their work. It is possible that they did so in small workshops close to the temples, as depicted on this issue's cover. **AW**



*A bronze shield facing currently in the museum of Olympia.*

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