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CHAPTER 4

"Standing Your Ground": Discourses of Courage on the Battlefield in Greek and Roman Historiography

Lidewij van Gils and Luuk Huitink

1 Introduction

To the famous Athenian general Laches – or at least the version of him that Plato conjures up for us in his eponymous dialogue, *Laches* – the matter appears quite simple.[1] Asked by Socrates to define "courage" (ἀνδρεία), he replies:

> οὐ μὰ τὸν Δία, ὦ Σώκρατες, οὐ χαλεπὸν εἰπεῖν· εἰ γάρ τις ἐθέλοι ἐν τῇ τάξει μένων ἀμύνεσθαι τοὺς πολεμίους καὶ μὴ φεύγοι, εὖ ἴσθι ὅτι ἀνδρεῖος ἂν εἴη. (Pl. *La.* 190e4–6)
>
> Upon my word, Socrates, that is not difficult to say: if a man is willing to stay in formation and defend himself against the enemy and does not run away, then you can be sure that he is courageous.[2]

Socrates, however, is not satisfied with this description of courageous behavior on the battlefield but is looking for a broader definition of "courage" based on general principles.[3] Before moving on to such issues, however, Socrates first demonstrates to Laches that, even taken on its own terms, his definition of

1 For a brief account of the life and career of Laches, see Nails (2002) 180–81.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, we use the Loeb translations for all extended passages, occasionally with modifications.

3 It is logical that a military man like Laches should think first of the battlefield as the place where courage most obviously shows itself. But the idea that courage was first and foremost a military virtue and could be defined in terms of what hoplites needed to do to accomplish victory was in fact widespread; see Pritchard (2013) 179–84. For Aristotle, too, courage shown in war is the prototypical form: κυρίως δὴ λέγοιτ' ἂν ἀνδρεῖος ὁ περὶ τὸν καλὸν θάνατον ἀδεής, καὶ ὅσα θάνατον ἐπιφέρει ὑπόγυια ὄντα· τοιαῦτα δὲ μάλιστα τὰ κατὰ πόλεμον (*Eth. Nic.* 1115a32–5: "one will call that man courageous in the proper sense of the word who fearlessly faces a noble death or any imminent peril that threatens death; such things are especially found in war"). For a comparison between ancient and modern conceptions of "courage," which likewise takes Laches' definition as its starting point, see Zavaliy and Aristidou (2014).

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"courage" falls short. For instance, Socrates avers, the success of cavalrymen in battle crucially depends on their maneuverability, which involves both pursuit and withdrawal, and not just "remaining in line." And even if limited to hoplites, Laches' definition still does not cover all cases:

> Λακεδαιμονίους γάρ φασιν ἐν Πλαταιαῖς, ἐπειδὴ πρὸς τοῖς γερροφόροις ἐγένοντο, οὐκ ἐθέλειν μένοντας πρὸς αὐτοὺς μάχεσθαι, ἀλλὰ φεύγειν, ἐπειδὴ δ' ἐλύθησαν αἱ τάξεις τῶν Περσῶν, ἀναστρεφομένους ὥσπερ ἱππέας μάχεσθαι καὶ οὕτω νικῆσαι τὴν ἐκεῖ μάχην. (Pl. *La.* 191b8–c5)
>
> For they say that at Plataea, when the Spartans came up to the men with wicker shields, they were not willing to stand and fight against these, but fled; when, however, the Persian ranks were broken, the Spartans kept turning round and fighting like cavalry, and so won that battle.

Surely, Socrates implies, Laches – who had earlier said that the Spartans "have no other concern in life than to look for and engage in whatever studies and pursuits will increase their superiority in war" (182e6–183a2) – would not call the victors of the famous Battle of Plataea against the Persians (479 BCE) cowards? Laches cannot but agree with Socrates.

While this exchange may not meet Socrates' philosophical criteria, the views expressed are probably an accurate reflection of how a military practitioner from the fifth or fourth century, well versed in hoplite warfare, would have understood courage on the battlefield. Two points, on which we will elaborate below, stand out. First, in Laches' view, courage is not – or at least not only – about displays of personal valor and heroic exploits, but is subservient to discipline and the practical effectiveness of the military unit as a whole ("remaining in line"), and it is also – at least on second analysis – context-dependent, as is shown by the Spartans' strategic retreat at Plataea, which was informed by the specific circumstances of that battle. Second, because of his admiration for the Spartans, Laches readily admits that his initial definition is wrong rather than having to call them "cowards." This shows that "courage" and "cowardice" are value-laden terms, deeply entwined with notions of honor and prestige.[4] (Incidentally, it is worth noting in this connection that Socrates did not explicitly state that the Spartan maneuver at Plataea, which is not attested elsewhere,[5] resulted from deliberate tactics rather than, for example, fear – though his use of the term φεύγειν "flee," adopted from Laches' initial

4 See Sluiter and Rosen (2003) 1–3.

5 Cf. Tatham (1966) 73.

definition, in fact seems to lean toward the latter explanation. However, Laches might well assume that the victorious outcome itself is evidence of superior tactics and indeed of courage: after all, history is written by the victors.)

Ancient historiographers, too, grappled with these aspects of courage in war.[6] As they reconstructed battles in their narratives, they had to decide what role courage (of individuals or entire units and armies) had played in determining their outcome and how it had interacted with other factors, such as discipline, strategy, and contextual circumstances. They had to determine how much attention they would allocate to narrating courageous (or cowardly) behavior in the heat of battle and what narrative devices they should use to shed light on it. Furthermore, since moralizing concerns were never far below the surface in ancient historiography, they were also preoccupied with the moral connotations of terms like "courage" and "cowardice" and how they factored into the rhetoric of praise and blame that often surrounds battles.[7] They sometimes concurred with, and at other times contested, the narratives put forth by others, such as generals and soldiers. By including speeches or deliberations attributed to important figures, historiographers presented characters wrestling with these moral dilemmas and used such moments to reflect on broader ethical questions. In doing so, they implicitly or explicitly commented on the ideas expressed, guiding their audience toward a particular understanding of virtue, leadership, and moral facets of warfare.

This chapter, which serves as part of the introductory section of the present volume, explores the rhetoric of courage in Greek and Roman historiography.[8] It raises several key issues that will be examined in more specific detail in subsequent chapters.[9] Given the vast scope of the material, this chapter can only offer an initial foray into the topic. Rather than attempting a comprehensive overview, we focus on specific passages from the works of major classical Greek and Roman historians in which courage is foregrounded. Through this approach, we aim to reveal common narrative devices and techniques employed by these historians to construct "discourses of courage." The discussion begins with speeches, the context in which issues of courage are most explicitly negotiated, with some attention devoted to the terminology employed. It then moves to narratorial comments about courage, exploring to whom courage is attributed and for what purposes. Next, the focus shifts to narrative accounts of battle, examining how vivid descriptions may bring

6 See Rood (2010) for war as one of the main topics of ancient historiography.

7 See Hau (2016) for the moralizing tendency of much of ancient historiography.

8 For the rhetorical nature of ancient historiography, see Woodman (1988); Laird (2009).

9 See especially the chapters of Phang, Ash, and Rance in this volume.

courageous behavior to life for readers. Finally, the chapter weaves these threads together in a sustained analysis of the "discourse of courage" surrounding Herodotus' account of the Battle of Plataea.

2 Negotiating Courage: Speeches

One clear manifestation of how ancient historians construct rhetorically and morally charged discourses of courage is their use of varied terminology. While Greek ἀνδρεία (adjective ἀνδρεῖος) and Latin *fortitudo* (adjective *fortis*) are the prototypical terms, there are many other words that denote aspects of courage, too, each with its own connotations. For instance, in Greek the general words ἀγαθός ("good") and ἐσθλός ("noble") often primarily refer to a man's military valor, indicating that one's standing in society is first and foremost defined in military terms. Furthermore, terms like θάρσος ("audacity," "bravery"), λῆμα ("determination") and τόλμα ("daring") single out someone's readiness to take bold and daring actions in the heat of battle (the outward manifestations of courage, so to speak), whereas a term like ἀλκή ("prowess") rather refers to someone's inner strength and conviction.[10] In Latin, the general word for "virtue," *virtus*, is often used for military courage in particular, reflecting the Roman cultural ideal that moral excellence is really inseparable from martial prowess. On the other hand, words like *audacia* ("recklessness," "boldness") and *temeritas* ("rashness") are frequently used to criticize forms of daring that exceed the bounds of reason or moral acceptability. What seems to be the most common expression to refer to courage is the multifaceted word *animus*, or combinations like *vis animi*.[11] Indeed, the main purpose of this nuanced vocabulary in ancient historiography appears to be to distinguish between proper and improper displays of courage, revealing something about the moral and rhetorical frameworks at work in our texts.

Ancient historians employ specific terms to shape the audience's understanding and evaluation of characters and events, sometimes in explicit narratorial comments (see below). However, in many works of historiography, starting with that of Thucydides, most explicit talk about courage is in fact found in speeches attributed to the historical actors.[12] In such speeches,

10 Cf. Zavaliy (2020) 17–19.

11 See the semantic studies of MacDonnell (2006) and Balmaceda (2017).

12 See Rood (2017) for Thucydides' general tendency to be sparing in delivering pronouncements on moral qualities in his own voice, instead allowing characters to discuss them at length.

terminology is occasionally scrutinized directly and its meaning debated to advance rhetorical and ideological arguments. One illustrative example appears in a speech by Cato the Younger from Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*, in which the Roman senator argues that Catiline and his fellow conspirators do not deserve clemency:

> *Hic mihi quisquam mansuetudinem et misericordiam nominat? iam pridem equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus: quia bona aliena largiri liberalitas, malarum rerum audacia fortitudo vocatur, eo res publica in extremo sita est.* (Sall. *Cat.* 52.11)
>
> In these circumstances, does someone mention to me clemency and compassion? To be sure, we have long since lost the true names for things. It is precisely because squandering the goods of others is called generosity, and recklessness in wrongdoing is called courage, that the republic has been placed in a crisis.

Cato identifies the misapplication of the term *fortitudo*, which he argues has been degraded to dignify reckless and immoral behavior (*audacia*), as one sign of the moral decay of the Roman Republic. His words establish a tension between true courage, grounded in virtuous (military) action, and its distortion for political ends. The theme of civil discord is underlined by a clear reminiscence of Thucydides' famous description of *stasis*, where the historian similarly diagnoses the misapplication of evaluative terms as symptomatic of the fraying of society's moral fabric – for example, when "heedless recklessness" (τόλμα ἀλόγιστος) comes to be called "loyal courage" (ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος, Thuc. 3.82.4). Cato's speech demonstrates that terminology is never merely descriptive but also evaluative, reflecting deeper ideological and political struggles.

While Sallust presents us with a debate in the Roman Senate in which courage and recklessness are explicitly contrasted, other speeches are more directly tied to military combat, where the stakes of courage and cowardice are immediate and visceral. This battlefield context often amplifies the rhetorical and moral weight of these terms, as the speeches become vehicles for exhortation, justification, or reflection on martial values. Of particular relevance are pre-battle exhortations (παρακλητικοὶ λόγοι), which Thucydides made an established feature of the genre of Greek and Roman historiography.[13] An example

13 For the *topoi* of the genre, see Albertus (1908). See Adema (2016) for a linguistic and narratological approach to Caesar's pre-battle speeches. Some scholars have in fact argued that the formal pre-battle speech is primarily a literary device invented by Thucydides,

is the speech delivered by the Peloponnesian commanders before a sea battle in the Corinthian Gulf off Naupactus (429 BCE). The commanders begin by recalling an earlier defeat at sea and blaming it on the Peloponnesians' lack of experience in sea battles; they then claim that courage can compensate for that defect:

> ὑμῶν δὲ οὐδ' ἡ ἀπειρία τοσοῦτον λείπεται ὅσον τόλμῃ προύχετε: τῶνδε δὲ ἡ ἐπιστήμη, ἣν μάλιστα φοβεῖσθε, ἀνδρείαν μὲν ἔχουσα καὶ μνήμην ἕξει ἐν τῷ δεινῷ ἐπιτελεῖν ἃ ἔμαθεν, ἄνευ δὲ εὐψυχίας οὐδεμία τέχνη πρὸς τοὺς κινδύνους ἰσχύει. φόβος γὰρ μνήμην ἐκπλήσσει, τέχνη δὲ ἄνευ ἀλκῆς οὐδὲν ὠφελεῖ. πρὸς μὲν οὖν τὸ ἐμπειρότερον αὐτῶν τὸ τολμηρότερον ἀντιτάξασθε, πρὸς δὲ τὸ διὰ τὴν ἧσσαν δεδιέναι τὸ ἀπαράσκευοι τότε τυχεῖν. (Thuc. 2.87.4–5)
>
> Nor are you so behind the enemy in experience as you are ahead of him in courage; and although the science of your opponents, which you fear the most, would, if valor accompanied it, also have the presence of mind to carry out in an emergency the lesson it has learnt, yet a faint heart will make all art powerless in the face of danger. For fear takes away presence of mind, and without valor, skill is useless. Against their superior experience set your superior daring, and against the fear induced by defeat, the fact of your having then been unprepared.

The commanders even end by threatening would-be cowards who might contemplate leaving their post, and promising rewards for valor:

> θαρσοῦντες οὖν καὶ κυβερνῆται καὶ ναῦται τὸ καθ' ἑαυτὸν ἕκαστος ἔπεσθε, χώραν μὴ προλείποντες ᾗ ἄν τις προσταχθῇ. τῶν δὲ πρότερον ἡγεμόνων οὐ χεῖρον τὴν ἐπιχείρησιν ἡμεῖς παρασκευάσομεν, καὶ οὐκ ἐνδώσομεν πρόφασιν οὐδενὶ κακῷ γενέσθαι: ἢν δέ τις ἄρα καὶ βουληθῇ, κολασθήσεται τῇ πρεπούσῃ ζημίᾳ, οἱ δὲ ἀγαθοὶ τιμήσονται τοῖς προσήκουσιν ἄθλοις τῆς ἀρετῆς. (Thuc. 2.87.8–9)
>
> Steersmen and sailors should, therefore, confidently attend to their several duties, none quitting the station assigned to them; as for ourselves, we promise to prepare for the engagement at least as well as your previous commanders, and to give no excuse for anyone conducting himself

---

with only tenuous links to historical reality, but this is no longer widely believed; Lendon (2017) 149–50 summarizes the debate.

> poorly. Should any insist on doing so, he shall meet with the punishment he deserves, while the brave shall be honored with the appropriate rewards of valor.

In turn, the Athenian commander, Phormio, suggests that his troops need not fear the supposed bravery of the Peloponnesians (a Thucydidean artifice, as Phormio could not have heard the speech made on the Peloponnesian side):

> ἔπειτα ᾧ μάλιστα πιστεύοντες προσέρχονται, ὡς προσῆκον σφίσιν ἀνδρείοις εἶναι, οὐ δι᾽ ἄλλο τι θαρσοῦσιν ἢ διὰ τὴν ἐν τῷ πεζῷ ἐμπειρίαν τὰ πλείω κατορθοῦντες, καὶ οἴονται σφίσι καὶ ἐν τῷ ναυτικῷ ποιήσειν τὸ αὐτό. (Thuc. 2.89.2)
>
> Next, as to that upon which they most rely, the courage which they suppose constitutional to them, their confidence here only arises from the success which their experience in land service usually gives them, and which they fancy will do the same for them at sea.

Whereas the Peloponnesian commanders tried to dissociate courage from experience, Phormio suggests that the latter inspires the former. Interestingly, as is the case more often (see below), the question of how these pre-battle pronouncements bear on the subsequent narrative of the sea battle itself cannot be readily answered, although one commentator suggests that in the present case a careful reading confirms Phormio's claim that courage depends on experience and knowledge: it is an unexpected move by an Athenian ship which creates a "panic" (φόβος) among the Peloponnesians.[14]

Pre-battle exhortations are part and parcel of Roman historiography as well. Indeed, Roman historians widen the scope of generals' speeches beyond the battlefield itself: we regularly find generals addressing troops, but also senators and even the Roman people. This broader setting reflects the political and social dimensions of Roman military life. Sallust, for instance, provides a striking example in his account of Marius addressing the Roman people to rally recruits for the war in Africa, of which this is the ending:

> *"... Egomet in agmine aut in proelio consultor idem et socius periculi vobiscum adero, meque vosque in omnibus rebus iuxta geram. Et profecto dis iuvantibus omnia matura sunt: victoria, praeda, laus. Quae si dubia aut*

14 Cf. Lendon (2017) 147.

> *procul essent, tamen omnis bonos rei publicae subvenire decebat. Etenim nemo ignavia inmortalis factus est, neque quisquam parens liberis uti aeterni forent optavit, magis uti boni honestique vitam exigerent. Plura dicerem, Quirites, si timidis virtutem verba adderent. Nam strenuis abunde dictum puto." Huiusce modi oratione habita Marius, postquam plebis animos adrectos videt, propere conmeatu, stipendio, armis aliisque utilibus navis onerat.* (Sall. *Jug.* 85–86)
>
> "… I myself, one who both takes counsel concerning danger and shares in it, shall be right there with you on the march or in battle; and I shall treat myself and you alike in all situations. And surely everything, with the help of the gods, is on the point of being realized – victory, spoils, glory. But even if those incentives were uncertain or remote, it would still be fitting for all good men to come to the aid of the nation. Truly, no one ever became immortal through cowardice; and no parent has prayed for his children to live forever but rather that they might lead noble and honorable lives. I would say more, Citizens, if words could instill courage in cowards. For those who are resolute I think I have spoken long enough." After Marius had made a speech of this sort and saw the spirits of the commons aroused, he quickly loaded his ships with provisions, money, arms, and other serviceable things.

Marius invokes traditional Roman values of victory, spoils, and glory but places the greatest emphasis on the courage of "good men to come to the aid of the nation," contrasting it with the futility of cowardice. Marius concludes by admitting that words alone cannot "instill courage in cowards," a *topos* of pre-battle exhortations that here reinforces the Roman ideal of inherent bravery. Aware, however, of the effectiveness of his speech, he quickly capitalizes on his rhetorical success by preparing for war.

Another opportunity offered by speeches, which is particularly often exploited in Roman historiography, is the chance to explore themes of Roman imperialism from the perspective of the conquered, providing a valuable counterpoint to the Roman worldview. Through the voices of non-Roman leaders, Roman historians can contrast the values of the empire with those of its enemies, including with regard to moral concepts such as courage. These moments often highlight not just the differences but also the complexity of these values, revealing a nuanced picture that is rarely one-dimensional. Such speeches allow the reader to engage with the ethical frameworks of both sides, showing how the conquered may share certain Roman ideals while simultaneously presenting their own, often in stark opposition to the Roman interpretation.

A striking example is the speech of Critognatus in Caesar's *De Bello Gallico* (7.77).[15]

This speech appears in Caesar's detailed and exciting report of the siege of Alesia (*BGall.* 7.77–78) and includes a council of war held by the Gallic warriors within the city walls. The city had been completely surrounded by a double siege line of Caesar's troops; it had run out of food, and there was still no sign of Gallic support. The two obvious military choices put forward by the Gallic leaders were either to surrender or to break out of the city and engage with the Roman army. The latter option was exactly what the Roman military was waiting for, and it was easy to imagine that the Gauls would not survive that encounter. Then a Gallic leader named Critognatus takes the floor and gives an elaborate speech, which is qualified by Caesar as "of remarkable and abominable cruelty" (*singularem et nefariam crudelitatem*, 7.77.2). Critognatus starts by saying that surrender would equal slavery and that whoever favors that option does not even belong in the council. Staking everything on a battle now, however, is also not an option, if reinforcements have not arrived. To be sure, fighting would be in line with "a record of ancient courage" (*pristinae virtutis memoria*) which the Gauls hold high, but it is a sign of cowardice (*animi mollitia*), if it is preferred to a more painful, yet better, option:

> *Cum his mihi res sit, qui eruptionem probant; quorum in consilio omnium vestrum consensu pristinae residere virtutis memoria videtur. Animi est ista mollitia, non virtus, paulisper inopiam ferre non posse. Qui se ultro morti offerant facilius reperiuntur quam qui dolorem patienter ferant.* (Caes. *BGall.* 7.77.4–5)
>
> Let my business be with those who approve a sortie; and in their design, by your general agreement, there seems to remain a memory of ancient courage. This is faint-heartedness of yours, not courage, to be unable to endure want for a short space. It is easier to find men to fling themselves recklessly on death than men to endure pain patiently.

That other, painful option, for which Critognatus goes on to argue, is to win time by eating those people in Alesia who were useless for the war effort. The speech of Critognatus is remarkable for various reasons. It is the longest direct speech attributed to a character in *De Bello Gallico*, a fact that underscores its narrative and rhetorical significance. Furthermore, it represents one of the

15 See Brown (2019) for an in-depth analysis of the speech of Critognatus, and Adema (2017) for a general analysis of Caesar's use of speeches.

earliest examples in Roman historiography of a non-Roman leader articulating a coherent stance against Roman imperialism. Strikingly, Critognatus does so by mirroring key themes of Roman rhetoric, such as his invocation of ancestral virtue and his emphasis on endurance over recklessness, implicitly suggesting intellectual parity between Romans and Gauls. However, when it comes to defining courage and cowardice, Critognatus' argument diverges sharply from Roman values. His advocacy of cannibalism – a stark violation of Roman ethical norms – casts him as distinctly non-Roman despite his rhetorical sophistication.

Caesar's portrayal of Critognatus is at once admiring and damning. He sketches an image of a fierce opponent with a valid goal for his people, demonstrating a courage and tenacity that Caesar cannot help but recognize, even if he finds the methods repellent. Critognatus, as a leader of his people, is not simply a cowardly villain but a man driven by desperate circumstances, willing to sacrifice everything for the survival of his tribe. This implicit admiration highlights a tension in Caesar's narrative: while Critognatus is cast as "the Other," embodying moral and strategic values that contrast with Rome's, Caesar is nonetheless forced to acknowledge the strength of will and courage displayed by the Gallic leader. In the end, Critognatus may be a savage in the eyes of Rome, but his bravery and the determination of the Gauls cannot be denied.

3 Evaluating Courage: the Narrator's Perspective

Historians address issues of courage not only in speeches, where questions of courage are most explicitly negotiated, but also in their own narrative voice, often in what are termed "weighing passages" within battle narratives, where the reasons for victory or defeat are assessed.[16] Courage regularly features in evaluative comments, but usually in combination with other factors, taking on a complementary role rather than necessarily being portrayed as the most decisive element. For instance, Polybius (1.6.4) attributes Roman control of Latium to "courage and good fortune in battle" (διά τε τὴν ἀνδρείαν καὶ τὴν ἐν ταῖς μάχαις ἐπιτυχίαν), while elsewhere (8.10.6) he credits Macedonia's rise from a petty kingdom to a significant monarchy to "the energy and daring" (ταῖς σφετέραις φιλοπονίαις καὶ τόλμαις) of Philip and his men. Similarly, Diodorus Siculus (15.36.6) highlights Timotheus' success in "winning battles

16 Lendon (2017) 62–63.

through courage and good generalship" (νικῶν δὲ δι᾽ ἀνδρείαν καὶ στρατηγίαν), and Plutarch (*Comp. Per. Fab.* 2.3) attributes Rome's victory against Carthage "not to luck, but to the wisdom and valor of the general [Scipio], who utterly conquered their enemies" (οὐ τύχῃ, σοφίᾳ δὲ τοῦ στρατηγοῦ καὶ ἀνδρείᾳ κατὰ κράτος νικήσαντος τοὺς πολεμίους). Furthermore, the courage of one party can be contrasted with antithetical qualities of the other. Courage is particularly often contrasted with "cunning tricks" (στρατηγήματα), which, unlike courage, conflict with the ideals of hoplite ethics.[17] A succinct example appears in Justin (9.2.14): "the Scythians excelled in valor and spirit but were defeated by Philip's cunning" (*cum virtute et animo praestarent Scythae, astu Philippi vincuntur*). This assessment casts Philip's victory in a negative light owing to his reliance on cunning.

For a more elaborate example, in which courage takes on an unusually prominent role, we turn to Thucydides' (5.74) interesting assessment of the outcome of the Battle of Mantinea between Sparta and an alliance of Argos and Athens (418 BCE) (as it happens, Laches lost his life during that battle). As Thucydides tells the story – in one of his most elaborate battle narratives – a series of maneuvers instigated by the Spartan king Agis are unsuccessful, in part because two other commanders refuse to obey his orders (for which they will later be banished, "having been deemed cowards" (δόξαντας μαλακισθῆναι, Thuc. 5.72.1)) and leave dangerous gaps in the Spartan line. Thucydides in effect suggests that the commanders' actions led to what in Greek tactical thinking is called ἀταξία ("disorder"), a breakdown of discipline that results in neglecting proper deployment and formation (that is, the opposite of "staying in line" and "standing your ground"). Ἀταξία and its opposite, εὐταξία, loom large in explanations of victory and defeat since the beginning of the historiographical tradition (see below for an example from Herodotus).[18] In the next phase of the story, the Spartans nonetheless manage to turn things around: "utterly worsted in respect of skill, at that moment they showed themselves superior in courage" (κατὰ πάντα τῇ ἐμπειρίᾳ Λακεδαιμόνιοι ἐλασσωθέντες τότε τῇ ἀνδρείᾳ ἔδειξαν οὐχ ἧσσον περιγενόμενοι, 5.72.2).[19]

This explicit attribution of the reversal to Spartan bravery is exceptional in Thucydides' work. It should be noted that it serves a wider point: as Thucydides

17 Lendon (2005) 86–87 discusses this salient opposition.

18 Lendon (1999) 282, with many parallels. For the opposite, see, e.g. Herodotus' attribution of the victory at Salamis to the fact that the Greeks "fought the naval battle in disciplined order and remained in their ranks" (σὺν κόσμῳ ναυμαχεόντων καὶ κατὰ τάξιν).

19 For the use of ἐμπειρία here (referring to professional and technical skill as acquired through experience), see *CT ad loc.*

goes on to say, the Spartan victory at Mantinea made the other Greeks realize that their earlier shocking defeat at Sphacteria was due to bad luck rather than – as they had been eager to believe – cowardice (μαλακία, 5.75.3).[20] Furthermore, even here Thucydides does not explain the outcome as solely based on courage. The subsequent description of the battle continues to highlight the tactical maneuvers of various divisions. Ultimately, the elite Spartan troops surrounding Agis break the Argive line, composed of older men, decisively turning the tide (5.72.4). Thus, while Thucydides singles out Spartan courage as pivotal at a critical moment – specifically their refusal to withdraw when the battle seemed lost – other factors remain significant in the overall account. Spartan bravery, as portrayed here, is not an inherent and steady disposition but rather a situational response, emphasizing the complexity of Thucydides' explanation of military success.[21]

These examples highlight another important aspect of attributions of courage by ancient historians. When they evaluate acts of bravery on the battlefield, they usually focus on entire armies or groups within an army, only occasionally singling out exceptional individuals.[22] Such attributions sometimes reflect achievements in a specific battle and sometimes mirror cultural stereotypes, such as a commonly found contrast between brave hoplites and cowardly archers (who did not fight at close range).[23] Passages highlighting individual achievements are always remarkable and may ultimately go back to epic *aristeia* scenes.[24] An example that springs to mind is Herodotus' description of Pytheas son of Ischenous (7.181.1–2), who, during the naval battle off Skiathos, "proved himself the most valiant man on that day" (ἀνδρὸς ἀρίστου γενομένου ταύτην τὴν ἡμέρην), because even though his ship was lost "he continued to fight until he had been almost completely butchered" (ἐς τοῦτο ἀντεῖχε

20 Cf. Rood (1998) 83.

21 However, Thucydides' explicit comment, combined with stereotypes about innate Spartan bravery, has led to an overestimation of the scope of Thucydides' judgment with modern historians; cf., e.g., Gaebel (2002) 101: "The battle was won by the courage and discipline of the Spartans under their king, Agis."

22 See also the chapters in Part 4 of this volume. See in general on the attribution of moral qualities to larger and smaller groups and to individuals: Pitcher (2017), focusing on Polybius, but with a wider applicability.

23 See Pritchard (2018) 93–96.

24 This has often been noted in particular about Thucydides' description of the Spartan general Brasidas, especially the detailed account of his actions during the Spartan attack on the Athenian fortification at Pylos (4.11–12); cf. *CT* 2:38–61, though it should be kept in mind that Brasidas' portrait is exceptional and ultimately presents a problematic example of extraordinary daring rather than a model of traditional Spartan courage; cf. Burns (2015); Wheatland (2020).

μαχόμενος ἐς ὃ κατεκρεουργήθη ἅπας) and was eventually spared by the Persians out of respect for such bravery; Pytheas' courage appears to consist especially in his continuing willingness to fight, even when things looked very dire indeed.[25] Another celebrated example is Artemisia, Herodotus' assessment of whom as someone who fought with "spirit and courage" (ὑπὸ λήματός τε καὶ ἀνδρηίης, 7.99.1) is fully borne out by the subsequent narrative of her conduct during the Battle of Salamis (8.87–8).[26] Thucydides also occasionally attributes "(military) excellence" (ἀρετή) to individuals, which may carry connotations of courage; for instance, the "excellence" of the Sicilian general Hermocrates consists of his "being experienced in war and conspicuous in bravery" (κατὰ τὸν πόλεμον ἐμπειρίᾳ τε ἱκανὸς γενόμενος καὶ ἀνδρείᾳ ἐπιφανής, 6.72.2) – certainly a combination that Thucydides highly valued.[27] However, the number of "Homeric" vignettes in Thucydides showcasing individual acts of bravery is greatly reduced compared to Herodotus.[28]

The Roman historiographical tradition adapts conventions developed by the Greeks to the Roman context. In particular, Greek competitiveness in evaluating individuals or cities in order to praise the winner(s) makes way for a generally accepted idea of Roman superiority in contradistinction to other peoples and a dislike for internal competition, which is seen as dangerous *discordia*. We have already seen examples of ethnographic prejudice about (definitions of) courage in different ethnic groups in generals' speeches, and historians may confirm or deny such prejudices in their own voice as well. Tacitus, for instance, explores how Germans both align with and diverge from Roman values of courageous fighting. Consider the following passage:

> *acies per cuneos componitur. cedere loco, dummodo rursus instes, consilii quam formidinis arbitrantur. corpora suorum etiam in dubiis proeliis referunt. scutum reliquisse praecipuum flagitium, nec aut sacris adesse aut*

25 On the general reluctance of ancient historiographers to describe violent and gruesome acts on the battlefield in detail, see Fragoulaki (2021); Huitink (2023) 70–73. Such scenes remain relatively rare; cf., e.g., Pol. 10.49.14, where Antiochus III at the Battle of the Arius (208 BCE) has a horse killed under him "and he himself received a wound in the mouth and lost several of his teeth, but having in general gained a greater reputation for courage on this occasion than on any other." The detailed attention to the nature of his wounds is reminiscent of epic.

26 See Harrell (2003) 80–86 on the gendered aspects of this attribution of courage.

27 See De Bakker (2013) 26–27; Rood (2017) 161.

28 Lendon (1999) 304 n. 70: "But the austere Thucydides did not systematically describe deeds of valor."

> *concilium inire ignominioso fas; multique superstites bellorum infamiam laqueo finierunt.* (Tac. *Germ.* 6)
>
> The battleline itself is arranged in wedges: to retire, provided you press on again, they treat as a question of tactics, not of cowardice: they carry off their dead and wounded even in battles of doubtful issue. To have abandoned one's shield is the height of disgrace; the man so shamed cannot be present at religious rites, nor attend a council: many survivors of war have ended their infamy with a noose.

Tacitus highlights both similarities and differences between Roman and Germanic conceptions of courage. While the Germans share a general Graeco-Roman obsession with the disgrace of abandoning one's shield,[29] their take on retreating in the heat of battle is different. Unlike Romans, who often equate retreat with cowardice, the Germans regard it as a tactical maneuver, entirely devoid of dishonor – provided it is followed by a renewed attack. This distinction underscores their practical and situational approach to combat.

The same ethnographical and historical work on Germania further demonstrates how non-Romans tend to be evaluated in terms of how closely they approach Roman virtues. Tacitus describes the Chatti as a Germanic tribe distinguished by their remarkable discipline, organization, and courage, traits that make them resemble Romans:

> *duriora genti corpora, stricti artus, minax vultus et maior animi vigor, multum, ut inter Germanos, rationis ac sollertiae: praeponere electos, audire praepositos, nosse ordines, intellegere occasiones, differre impetus, disponere diem, vallare noctem, fortunam inter dubia, virtutem inter certa numerare, quodque rarissimum nec nisi Romanae disciplinae concessum, plus reponere in duce quam in exercitu. omne robur in pedite, quem super arma ferramentis quoque et copiis onerant: alios ad proelium ire videas, Chattos ad bellum.* (Tac. *Germ.* 30.2–3)
>
> This tribe has hardier bodies than the others, close-knit limbs, a forbidding expression, and more strength of intellect: there is much method in what they do, for Germans at least, and much shrewdness. They promote to office men of their own choice, and listen to the men so promoted; know their place in the ranks and recognize opportunities; reserve their

29 See the discussion of this *topos* in the chapter of Kucewicz in this volume; it is also taken up in the chapters of Hobbs and of Ash.

> attack; plan out their day; entrench at night; distrust luck, but rely on courage; and – the rarest thing of all, which only Roman discipline has been permitted to attain – depend on the initiative of the general rather than on that of the soldier. Their whole strength lies in their infantry, whom they load with iron tools and baggage, in addition to their arms: other Germans may be seen going to battle, but the Chatti go to war.

The fact that the German tribe of the Chatti distrust luck (*fortunam inter dubia*) but rely on courage (*virtutem inter certa numerare*) confirms a general prejudice about German (or in general barbarian) warriors which expresses the exact opposite idea, namely that they rely more on fortune than on courage.

In the greatest of Roman defeats against barbarians, the Battle of Cannae in 216 BCE, we can compare the weighing passages by Polybius in his Greek version of these dramatic events and that of Livy in his *History of Rome*. Polybius inserts a "weighing passage" after the battle narrative, which he starts by describing Cannae as "a battle in which both the victors and the vanquished displayed the utmost bravery" (μάχη γενναιοτάτους ἄνδρας ἔχουσα καὶ τοὺς νικήσαντας καὶ τοὺς ἡττηθέντας, 3.117.2). The proof he offers for this assertion is that so many of the defeated Romans had died: that is, they did not take flight (like one of their consuls did), but "died bravely" (ἀπέθανον εὐγενῶς, 3.117.4). He then goes on to explain the Carthaginian victory by pointing to their vast numerical superiority in the cavalry, suggesting that this is the take-away lesson from Cannae. The "weighing passage" of the Battle of Cannae in Livy's book 22 upgrades the idea of Roman courage to a higher level than in Polybius' version alongside a more pronounced contrast between Romans and Carthaginians. Although Hannibal had annihilated the Roman forces, Livy manages to present Cannae as an exceptional *exemplum* of Roman courage and superiority. After the fight, he writes, the Carthaginians gaze over the battlefield and see how the Romans had fought till the end, standing their ground and harming the enemy even with death in sight.[30] The fact that extreme courage was considered to be typical for Romans is shown by the course of history, as Livy states immediately after the defeat in his own voice:

30 Gazing over the battlefield after the fight is a historiographical *topos* also found in, for instance, Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae* (Sall. *Cat.* 61) where the narrator invites the reader to imagine the scene of the battlefield after the encounter between the Catilinarian revolutionaries and the Roman army in 63. The reader would have recognized the extreme courage (*audacia quantaque animi vis*) with which the Catilinarians had fought, because none had tried to flee.

> *Nulla profecto alia gens tanta mole cladis non obruta esset. Compares cladem ad Aegates insulas Carthaginiensium proelio nauali acceptam, qua fracti Sicilia ac Sardinia cessere, uectigales ac stipendiarios fieri se passi sunt, aut pugnam aduersam in Africa, cui postea hic ipse Hannibal succubuit; nulla ex parte comparandae sunt nisi quod minore animo latae sunt.* (Liv. 22.54.10–11)
>
> Assuredly no other nation would not have been overwhelmed by such a weight of disaster. Compare either the Carthaginians' disaster in the naval battle at the Aegate islands (after this they departed from Sicily and Sardinia with their power broken and allowed themselves to become taxpayers and tributaries) or the defeat in Africa to which Hannibal himself later succumbed – there is no respect in which these ought to be compared, except that they were endured with lesser courage.

Other peoples would have had less courage (*minore animo*) in enduring the disaster and returning to their former strength. Courage, in other words, is about overcoming difficulties for one's nation at the highest personal cost and, as such, is a quality that extends well beyond the battlefield. The Carthaginians had won this battle by fighting under the strategic guidance of their clever generals Hannibal and Hasdrubal, who outwitted the discordant Roman generals Varro and Aemilius Paullus.[31] However, as Livy points out in the quotation above, on later occasions the Africans would show that they lacked the courage to recover after a heavy defeat. At Cannae, many courageous Romans had died, but even after such a horrific defeat, other Romans would stand up to defend Rome.[32]

4 Narrating Courage

In the preceding sections, we have considered how courage is invoked in speeches and how historians weigh the presence or absence of bravery to explain the outcomes of battles. One might expect, however, that

31 See Pausch (2019) for the decisive element of '*fraus Punica*' in the outcome of the Battle of Cannae.

32 See Oakley (2019) for Livy's version of the Battle of Cannae in comparison with Polybius; van Gils and Kroon (2019) for a discourse-linguistic analysis of this passage; and Briscoe and Hornblower (2020) for the most recent introduction and commentary on book 22 of Livy.

historiography would also provide vivid descriptions of courageous behavior during the heat of battle. Yet, surprisingly, direct accounts of fighting tend to be sparse, often subordinated to discussions of tactical maneuvers or outcomes of stratagems.[33] The focus typically remains on the larger structure of the engagement rather than the personal experiences of those who fought. The connections between speeches, evaluative comments, and descriptions of the actual fighting may often seem rather unclear, as if "the elements that make up the account are present for their own purposes and do not drive, or discipline, each other."[34] Even so, there are moments in Greek and Roman historiography where narrative depicts something of the visceral reality of courage on the battlefield. These instances offer a glimpse into the lived experience of bravery, showing not just its outcomes but "what it is like" to act courageously in the chaos of war.[35] In this section, we examine two passages that transcend the usual focus on tactics and outcomes to illuminate the essence of courage in combat – one from the Greek and one from the Roman tradition.

Xenophon absorbed both Herodotus' and Thucydides' discourses of courage in his historiographical writings, calling both individuals and larger entities brave in his own voice,[36] and developing the commander's speech in various ways.[37] He did so, however, with a much more intense interest in the art of military command and the psychology of soldiers than either of his predecessors.[38] For Laches, as we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, it may have been self-evident that it takes a good deal of courage to "remain in line and not run away." However, it is thanks to Xenophon that modern readers can also occasionally appreciate this sentiment. A case in point is Xenophon's description of the Battle of Cunaxa (401 BCE), which was already praised in

33 See in general Lendon (2017); Huitink (2023). See also Kagan (2006), contrasting Caesar's (more usual) "eye of command" approach to war narrative with Ammianus Marcellinus' (more exceptional) "face of battle" approach.

34 Lendon (2017) 43.

35 See Herman (2007) on the idea that a story makes the reader experience "what it's like" to be part of a specific story world as one of the defining traits of narrative. The contributors to van Gils, De Jong, and Kroon (2019) explore various narrative devices in ancient war narrative that contribute to that idea. For the experience of fear, see van Gils and Kroon (2022).

36 Cf., e.g., *Hell.* 4.3.19 (Agesilaus is called brave when he takes a risky course of action when safety would have been an option); 7.5.16 (Athenian cavalrymen are called brave when they rush out to help the Mantineans, despite being severely outnumbered and just having suffered defeat).

37 Xenophon includes few formal pre-battle exhortations but prefers briefer harangues or other forms of encouragement; see Anson (2010) 312–14; Danzig (2024).

38 Lendon (1999) 290–95.

Antiquity for providing an "eye-witness feel."[39] It starts with a famous passage in which the approach of the enormous Persian army is described as seen through the eyes of the Greek soldiers as they are lined up for battle.[40] The tension remains palpable when the armies slowly approach each other, before finally being released when the Greeks can hold out no longer and charge:

> καὶ οὐκέτι τρία ἢ τέτταρα στάδια διειχέτην τὸ φάλαγγε ἀπ᾽ ἀλλήλων ἡνίκα ἐπαιάνιζόν τε οἱ Ἕλληνες καὶ ἤρχοντο ἀντίοι ἰέναι τοῖς πολεμίοις. ὡς δὲ πορευομένων ἐξεκύμαινέ τι τῆς φάλαγγος, τὸ ὑπολειπόμενον ἤρξατο δρόμῳ θεῖν: καὶ ἅμα ἐφθέγξαντο πάντες οἷον τῷ Ἐνυαλίῳ ἐλελίζουσι, καὶ πάντες δὲ ἔθεον. λέγουσι δέ τινες ὡς καὶ ταῖς ἀσπίσι πρὸς τὰ δόρατα ἐδούπησαν φόβον ποιοῦντες τοῖς ἵπποις. πρὶν δὲ τόξευμα ἐξικνεῖσθαι ἐκκλίνουσιν οἱ βάρβαροι καὶ φεύγουσι. καὶ ἐνταῦθα δὴ ἐδίωκον μὲν κατὰ κράτος οἱ Ἕλληνες, ἐβόων δὲ ἀλλήλοις μὴ θεῖν δρόμῳ, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν τάξει ἕπεσθαι. (Xen. *An.* 1.8.17–19)
>
> At length the opposing lines were not three or four stadia apart, and then the Greeks struck up the paean and began to advance against the enemy. And when, as they proceeded, a part of the phalanx billowed out, those who were left behind began to run; at the same moment they all set up the sort of war-cry which they raise to Enyalius, and then they were all running. It is also reported that some of them clashed their shields against their spears, thereby frightening the enemy's horses. And before an arrow reached them, the barbarians broke and fled. And then the Greeks pursued with all their might, but shouted meanwhile to one another not to run at a headlong pace, but to keep their ranks in the pursuit.

Xenophon here closely follows the Greek charge as it unfolds in real time and conveys something of what it is like to be involved in such an action. It shows how a coordinated, disciplined charge by a group of hoplites is a hard-won achievement in a situation that inherently promotes disintegration. Although Xenophon does not explicitly call the Greek soldiers "brave" or "courageous," the scene stands as an emblem of collective hoplite bravery. The reader can almost sense the odd mix of nervousness, elation, and competitiveness which makes it difficult for some people to control themselves in the sort of tense situation here described. The soldiers' courage lies more in their hard-won self-control than in uncoordinated, individual heroic antics.

39 Plut. *Artax.* 8.1–2, with Huitink (2019) 209–10.

40 *An.* 1.8.8–10, with Huitink (2019) 211–12. For the "experiential" feel of Xenophontic battle narratives, see Wirtz (2022); Huitink (2023).

Livy, in his narrative of the battle of the Trebia (218 BCE) zooms in on the soldiers' experiences of warfare (both physical and emotional) to bring out the dire consequences of a bad strategic decision. When the general Sempronius, supremely confident as he was (*ferox*), brought out his tired and hungry men and horses to fight Hannibal's Numidians, we read what the Roman soldiers had to endure:

> *Ad hoc raptim eductis hominibus atque equis, non capto ante cibo, non ope ulla ad arcendum frigus adhibita, nihil caloris inerat, et quidquid aurae fluminis ad-propinquabant, adflabat acrior frigoris vis. Ut vero refugientes Numidas insequentes aquam ingressi sunt – et erat pectoribus tenus aucta nocturno imbri, – tum utique egressis rigere omnibus corpora, ut vix armorum tenendorum potentia essent, et simul lassitudine et procedente iam die fame etiam deficere.* (Liv. 21.54.9)
>
> Moreover, men and horses had been turned out in haste, without stopping for food or doing anything to guard against becoming chilled; there was no warmth in them, and the nearer they approached the atmosphere of the river the sharper grew the cold wind in their faces. But when, in pursuit of the fleeing Numidians, they entered the water – swollen chest high with the rain that had fallen in the night – or at any rate when they got out upon the further bank, then indeed their bodies were all so benumbed that they could hardly hold their weapons; and at the same time they were fainting with fatigue, and, as the day wore on, with hunger as well.

As the battle continues, it becomes clear that Hannibal's strategic provocation and Sempronius' blind ambition in the end lead to a disastrous outcome for the Romans. The courage of the Roman soldiers is made tangible by describing (not just listing) the experiences of the almost unbearable physical and emotional circumstances in which they had to fight without sleep and food, while being cold and wet and at the end, even facing elephants. As Livy describes it: "Furthermore, the elephants towering at the extremities of the wings caused widespread flight, especially among the horses, which were terrified not just by the sight of them but also by their unfamiliar smell" (*ad hoc elephanti eminentes ab extremis cornibus, equis maxime non visu modo sed odore insolito territis, fugam late faciebant*, 21.55.7). After this scene full of sensory detail, the narrator implicitly points to the courage of these soldiers by stating: "despite these setbacks, the Roman line held firm for a time" (*in tot circumstantibus malis mansit aliquamdiu immota acies*, 21.55.10).

With such passages, Livy conveys a feeling of "what it's like" to be courageous in the Roman army and at the same time confirms that, even when the Romans lost, it was usually not due to cowardice – since even in dire circumstances soldiers would stand their ground – but of bad leadership.

5 Courage and Explanation: the Example of Plataea

For our final section, we will return to the start of the historiographical tradition and offer an analysis of the "discourse of courage" in Herodotus' account of the Battle of Plataea (9.62–75) – the same battle to which Socrates referred when he refuted Laches' definition of courage. By examining this episode, we gain insight into how the earliest surviving historian constructs a nuanced and layered "discourse of courage" of a kind that will continue to characterize the Greek and Roman historiographical traditions.

In the run-up to Plataea, Herodotus does not include set speeches such as we find in later historiography, but he does include a brief outburst by the Persian general Mardonius in the presence of some "medizing" Greeks (9.58). In this speech, Mardonius mistakes a tactical change in the plans of the Greeks (they had relocated the army to the foothills to avoid the Persian cavalry) for Spartan cowardice. The speech is included not so much as a reflection on strategic realities or real differences between Spartan and Persian conceptions of courage as an opportunity for dramatic irony and to provide a measure of satisfaction for the Greek reader, who knows that the move was a calculated one and that the overconfident Mardonius will lose the battle. Mardonius' Greek audience wisely remain silent after his outburst, a silence that amplifies the irony. The result is "one of the most sarcastic and bitterly ironic speeches in the *Histories*."[41]

Talk of courage is resumed when, soon after battle has been joined, Herodotus interrupts his story to comment on the reasons for the Greek victory in a weighing passage:

> λήματι μέν νυν καὶ ῥώμῃ οὐκ ἥσσονες ἦσαν οἱ Πέρσαι, ἄνοπλοι δὲ ἐόντες καὶ πρὸς ἀνεπιστήμονες ἦσαν καὶ οὐκ ὁμοῖοι τοῖσι ἐναντίοισι σοφίην. προεξαΐσσοντες δὲ κατ' ἕνα καὶ δέκα καὶ πλεῦνές τε καὶ ἐλάσσονες συστρεφόμενοι ἐσέπιπτον ἐς τοὺς Σπαρτιήτας καὶ διεφθείροντο. (Hdt. 9.62.3)

41 Flower and Marincola (2002) 208.

> The Persians were not inferior in courage or strength, but they did not have hoplite arms, and besides, they were untrained and no match for their opponents in skill. They were dashing out beyond the front lines individually or in groups of ten, joining together in larger or smaller bands, and charging right into the Spartan ranks, where they perished.

Herodotus suggests that rather than courage (he here uses λῆμα, denoting fierce resolution) and strength, the Greeks' superior equipment, experience, and tactical skill (σοφία, a word suggesting that it is a branch of established knowledge and a craft that can be learned and honed) made the difference – at least in the first phase of the battle.[42] The Persians' lack of those things require that they attack the Spartans in small groups dashing out beyond the main line; ultimately, then, the Persian defeat is caused by ἀταξία (see above).

Herodotus' use of a negative formulation – the Persians were *not* inferior in courage or strength – appears to presuppose a widespread assumption among his audience that the Persians *were* in fact inferior to Greeks in these respects, which would be in line with stereotypes of "weak" and "effeminate" barbarians from the East.[43] However, it may also point to a more general assumption that courage and strength are in fact the *main* or *only* deciding factors in battle, an assumption which is anchored in epic conceptions of heroism and cultural traditions that celebrate exceptional individual achievements. As we have seen, historians often counter such assumptions and on the whole present a more complex picture. This does not mean, however, that they do not engage at all with such popular discourse. Thus, a significant part of Herodotus' account of Plataea is taken up by a survey of the bravest fighters and contingents (9.71–5).[44] It starts as follows:

> ἠρίστευσε δὲ τῶν βαρβάρων πεζὸς μὲν ὁ Περσέων, ἵππος δὲ ἡ Σακέων, ἀνὴρ δὲ λέγεται Μαρδόνιος· Ἑλλήνων δέ, ἀγαθῶν γενομένων καὶ Τεγεητέων καὶ Ἀθηναίων, ὑπερεβάλοντο ἀρετῇ Λακεδαιμόνιοι. ἄλλῳ μὲν οὐδενὶ ἔχω ἀποσημήνασθαι (ἅπαντες γὰρ οὗτοι τοὺς κατ' ἑωυτοὺς ἐνίκων), ὅτι δὲ κατὰ τὸ ἰσχυρότατον προσηνείχθησαν καὶ τούτων ἐκράτησαν. καὶ ἄριστος ἐγένετο μακρῷ Ἀριστόδημος κατὰ γνώμας τὰς ἡμετέρας, ὃς ἐκ Θερμοπυλέων μοῦνος

42 Herodotus' comments on tactics here need to be integrated into a multifaceted view of historical causality; they exist side by side with, for instance, references to divine power. See Marincola (2018).

43 See Hall (1989); Balot (2014) 211–12. Plutarch (*Her. mal.* 874a) was offended that Herodotus could state that the Persians were as brave as the Greeks.

44 For other such passages, cf. Hdt. 6.114; 7.226–7; 8.11, 17, 93, 123; 9.105.

> τῶν τριηκοσίων σωθεὶς εἶχε ὄνειδος καὶ ἀτιμίην. μετὰ δὲ τοῦτον ἠρίστευσαν Ποσειδώνιός τε καὶ Φιλοκύων καὶ Ἀμομφάρετος ὁ Πιτανήτης. καίτοι γενομένης λέσχης ὃς γένοιτο αὐτῶν ἄριστος, ἔγνωσαν οἱ παραγενόμενοι Σπαρτιητέων Ἀριστόδημον μὲν βουλόμενον φανερῶς ἀποθανεῖν ἐκ τῆς παρεούσης οἱ αἰτίης, λυσσῶντά τε καὶ ἐκλείποντα τὴν τάξιν ἔργα ἀποδέξασθαι μεγάλα, Ποσειδώνιον δὲ οὐ βουλόμενον ἀποθνῄσκειν ἄνδρα γενέσθαι ἀγαθόν· τοσούτῳ τοῦτον εἶναι ἀμείνω. ἀλλὰ ταῦτα μὲν καὶ φθόνῳ ἂν εἴποιεν· οὗτοι δὲ τοὺς κατέλεξα πάντες, πλὴν Ἀριστοδήμου, τῶν ἀποθανόντων ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ μάχῃ τίμιοι ἐγένοντο, Ἀριστόδημος δὲ βουλόμενος ἀποθανεῖν διὰ τὴν προειρημένην αἰτίην οὐκ ἐτιμήθη. οὗτοι μὲν τῶν ἐν Πλαταιῇσι ὀνομαστότατοι ἐγένοντο. (Hdt. 9.71.1–72.1)

> The foreigners who proved the best and bravest were the Persian infantry and the cavalry of the Sacae, while Mardonius is said to have been the best and bravest of individual men. Of the Greeks, the Tegeans and Athenians proved noble and courageous, but the Lacedaemonians surpassed them in valor. I can present no proof of this judgment, since they all defeated the enemy units opposing them, except that the Lacedaemonians attacked the strongest division and conquered it. And in my opinion, the man who proved the best and bravest by far was Aristodemus, the only one of the three hundred to have survived Thermopylae, for which he had met with disgrace and dishonor. After him, the best were the Spartans Poseidonius, Philocyon, and Amompharetus. When the question of which man had proven himself the best came up for discussion, however, the surviving Spartans recognized that Aristodemus had wanted to die in front of everyone because of the charge against him, and so had left his post in a battle frenzy and accomplished great deeds, while Poseidonius did not want to die, but proved himself a noble and courageous man all the same, and was therefore much the better man for it. But perhaps it was jealousy that motivated them to render this judgment. Of those who died in this battle, all the men I have listed except for Aristodemus were awarded official honors, while Aristodemus was not because he had wanted to die for the reason I have just mentioned. Those were the men who won the greatest fame at Plataea.

Passages like these fit in with Herodotus' explicit goal of ensuring that "great and marvelous deeds, accomplished by both Greeks and foreigners" (ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα) do not remain "without glory" (ἀκλεᾶ, *proem*); the phrase "accomplish great deeds" (ἔργα ἀποδέξασθαι μεγάλα) here recurs in Herodotus' judgment of Aristodemus. This goal is rooted in the epic tradition and its aim of honoring and preserving

the κλέα ἀνδρῶν ("the glorious acts of men").[45] Herodotus shares this goal (as well as, presumably, its Homeric inspiration) with the historical actors themselves, since we know that during the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars prizes of valor (ἀριστεῖα) were awarded to both cities and individuals.[46] Toward the end of the passage cited here, Herodotus clearly alludes to a discussion about the awarding of such a prize, while his earlier ranking of the bravest Greek cities – Sparta, followed by Tegea and Athens – in this case appears to reflect his own judgment (given the "proof" he cares to offer), and his assessment of the Persians likely goes back to general Greek perceptions after the battle (note λέγεται "it is said"; it may further be noted that Mardonius was probably one of the few Persians whom the Greeks knew by name and whom at least some of them would have been able to recognize in battle).[47] The entire business of ranking (groups of) combatants bespeaks a conceptualization of war in terms of an athletic competition in bravery, which was deeply ingrained in classical Greek societies.[48]

Four aspects of the passage warrant further comment. First, in line with general historiographical practice (see above), Herodotus attributes "courage" to entities of various sizes. On a macro-social level, courage is attributed to entire nations or ethnic groups, such as "the Spartans," "the Athenians," or "the Tegeans." The fact that the Spartans are deemed to have fought most bravely at Plataea need not surprise us, both because the Spartans (and especially Spartan hoplites) embodied the very idea of courage in the Greek imagination and because Plataea came to be seen as a quintessentially Spartan victory (as the naval battle at Salamis came to be seen as a quintessentially Athenian one).[49] Above, we already referred to Greek prejudices about Persian "cowardice." Furthermore, on a micro-social level, courage is attributed to divisions of armies, such as "the infantry of the Persians" or "the cavalry of the Sacae." Finally, courage is (more exceptionally) also said to characterize individuals, and such characterization may or may not be in tension with that of larger social groups to which individuals belong: Mardonius is brave despite general Persian cowardice, while Aristodemus' bravery is in line with common preconceptions about Spartans.

45 See Lendon (1999) 304; Zavaliy (2020) 130.

46 See Hamel (1998) 64–70. For "courage" (not just on the battlefield) as a source of "marvel" (θαῦμα) in Herodotus, see Harrell (2003).

47 See Diod. 11.31.1, saying of Mardonius that "he fought bravely" (γενναίως ἀγωνισάμενος).

48 Lendon (2005) 45–47.

49 See Balot (2014) 207–11.

Second, as in the case of Thucydides' Mantinea narrative and several other passages discussed in this chapter, it is once again remarkable how little basis the various pronouncements on the valiant behavior of the various characters appear to have in the actual narrative of the battle. For example, the "cavalry of the Sacae," named at the start of the passage as the bravest cavalry unit among the Persian army, has not been mentioned at all in the preceding account of the fighting, so that it remains unclear what their contribution was. The same holds for Aristodemus, Poseidonius, Philocyon, and Amompharetus.

A third point worth noting is the fairly straightforward "logic of courage" that appears to underlie the entire passage. Herodotus' "proof" that the Spartans fought most bravely answers to the simple reasoning that those who win must have been courageous, and those who win against the most formidable opponents must therefore have been most courageous; this is one reason, incidentally, why the enemy is usually not denied valor altogether even in strongly partisan contexts: "the tougher the opposition the more glorious and 'heroic' the victory."[50] Herodotus' reason for awarding the title of the "bravest" soldier to the fallen Aristodemus also seems to be that he accomplished particularly "great deeds;" his battle rage is reminiscent of heroic behavior, perhaps recalling especially that of Achilles in book 21 of the *Iliad*.[51] One also cannot quite escape the impression that Herodotus highlights Aristodemus' actions simply because it makes for such a satisfying plotline: earlier, he was the only soldier to return home to Sparta from Thermopylae, and had met with "disgrace and dishonor" (ὄνειδός τε καὶ ἀτιμίην),[52] according to the harsh logic (institutionalized especially in Sparta) that, if winners are brave because they win, then losers are cowards because they lose – unless they die fighting.[53] Now, however, Plataea allows Aristodemus to take his revenge, bringing his story full circle.

Fourth and finally, however, it is important to stress that Herodotus stakes out an independent position in the debate on valor that ensued after Plataea: his historiographical judgment is not the same as that of the Spartans. In their view, Aristodemus' death wish disqualifies him from being truly brave, suggesting that they thought that overcoming a fear of death in battle is the greatest

50 Flower and Marincola (2002) 216 noting the *topos*.

51 Cf. Zavaliy (2020) 148. The verb λυσσῶντα ("rage"), a *hapax* in Herodotus, is cognate with epic λύσσα and likewise has connotations of madness; see, e.g., Hom. *Il.* 21.542–3 (about Achilles): λύσσα δέ οἱ κῆρ / αἰὲν ἔχε κρατερή, "a powerful rage ever possessed his heart."

52 Hdt. 7.231, where he already points forward to Aristodemus' conduct at Plataea.

53 Cf., e.g., Xen. *Hell.* 6.1.32: the Spartan navarch Callicratidas engages the obviously superior Athenian fleet at Arginusae, saying, in typically Laconic fashion, "that Sparta would fare none the worse if he were killed, but flight would be a disgrace."

sign of courage.[54] Furthermore, Herodotus claims that the Spartans were motivated by jealousy of Aristodemus, but this need not be true. The Spartans may well have considered Aristodemus a bad example for other hoplites and thus not worthy of a prize: probably, they shared Laches' view of courage, which is born from military practice and emphasizes its utilitarian aspects, where the primary goal is the all-important cohesion of the military unit. The Spartans, looking for good soldiers, probably assessed Aristodemus' battle rage, which caused him to "leave the line" (ἐκλείποντα τὴν τάξιν), differently from the historian, who was looking for a good, "epic" story.[55] True courage is not the same as mere reckless daring. We have seen a similar discrepancy between the views of the historian and the historical actors at work in Thucydides' Mantinea narrative, to the extent that Thucydides' attribution of exceptional courage to the Spartans sits oddly with two of their commanders being exiled for cowardly behavior.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the complex and multifaceted nature of the rhetoric surrounding courage in Greek and Roman historiography. By examining examples of speeches, narratorial evaluations, and battle narratives, we have aimed to give a flavor of how "discourses of courage" are constructed in our texts. Rather than offering a singular, unified definition, the various portrayals of courage reflect the nuanced and often contradictory values held by different cultures and individuals within these societies. As we have seen, courage is not only defined by the actions of warriors in battle, but also by the rhetorical strategies employed by authors and by the political and ethical contexts in which these stories are told. To fully reconstruct these "discourses of courage," one must consider the interplay between characters' views, the narrator's evaluations, and the narrative structure itself.

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54 This was also the view of Aristotle; see *Eth. Nic.* 1115a24–6.

55 Zavaliy (2020) 149; 159–60.

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