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Women During Conflict in Antiquity

Humans have engaged in war since antiquity, and naturally, gender roles during conflict have not been static. In some cases, women were perceived not only as weak and useless, but according to Aristotle, as a disadvantage where they cause more harm and confusion (Georgoudi, 2015). In other cases, such as in Claudian's accounts, women were somewhat able to participate in war, and according to Thucydides, women and men worked as a collective in battles, in some cases by throwing stones and tiles (Georgoudi, 2015). Moreover, women played the role of guardians, where they would guard the house while the men were away for war such as David's ten concubines (Slovang, 2015).

Before delving deep into the subject, it is important to note the problems we face when interpreting archeological evidence. There are three main types of evidence: texts, iconography, and bioarcheological remains. Texts and iconography are important and offer valuable information, however, they cannot be completely trusted as they are often propagandist and not very representative in the case of women. Bioarcheological evidence is also very important and offers us information not provided by the texts, however, interpreting the remains is not a simple task. It is important to keep the limitations of these sources in mind to understand that we cannot represent the struggles of ancient women in all fairness, as we do not have the means to do so.

Yet, in all cases, similar patterns of gender-based violence can be detected against women whether they were fighting, escaping or guarding. Sexual assault and rape are the main methods militaries used not only to harm women, but to also humiliate and get revenge on the male enemies (Gaca, 2011). Conquerors, such as Romans, Persians, and Greeks assumed ownership of captured women and exploited them by impregnation, prostitution, and non-sexual labor (Gaca, 2011). The reason behind this sort of violence against women might stem from patriarchal ideologies, that are most prominent in Greek philosophy, Judeo-Christian beliefs, and Western legal codes, where men believe they are superior to women, and therefore violence is used to ascertain this dominance (Fox, 2002). Additionally, women hold cultural importance wherein they preserve social and cultural stability, therefore by assaulting and harming the women, they are damaging this stability (Gaca, 2011). For this reason, the harm that is inflicted upon women varies depending on the purpose behind the conflict (Gaca, 2011).

For example, from Assyrian iconography, we can gather that women captured from enemy territories were represented as of lesser value than honorable women, wherein their heads were uncovered, and their skirts slightly raised (Day, 2016). We can draw comparisons with an Assyrian

law stating that married women should have their head covered in public, but prostitutes should uncover theirs (Day, 2016). Could that infer that captive were seen as prostitutes therefore subjecting them to sexual assault, or is it only putting them in the same social status? While both scenarios are plausible, here is an example of where the purpose behind the conflict is important to consider. At that time, the Assyrian empire was concerned with its expansion, and therefore the purpose was not to damage families but mostly to expand their lands and rule, which might suggest that it is less likely that women were assaulted during this particular conflict (Day, 2016). However, they might have been forced into prostitution later on, turned into concubines, or slaves. In any case, women still faced a lot of hardships during the siege before their capture, such as their milk drying out and being unable to feed their babies, and the well-attested textual evidence of women having to eat their babies and children to survive starvation (Day, 2016).

In other cases, we have solid proof of sexual assault and rape of women during conflict, one of the reasons being their duty to guard the house and take care of the children and injured, making them more susceptible to assault (Gardam, 2017). For example, the biblical narrative attests to the rape of the ten concubines David left to guard his house when he fled Jerusalem from his son Absalom (Slovang, 2015). The ten concubines were raped by Absalom, and he did so to prove his victory over his enemies (Slovang, 2015). While we cannot prove the occurrence of this incident, it is still important to consider, as it reflects the cultural beliefs and the gender roles at the time it was written.

Other examples come from literature such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where warriors such as Agamemnon and Achilles took women as war prizes, and supplied their camp with young females (Gaca, 2011). They explicitly mentioned the forced copulation that occurs between warriors and captured women, it is recognized as habitual rape, and it is intentionally forceful (Gaca, 2011). It is also clear that warriors captured women and young children from villages they plundered and it was one of the duties of the warriors to rape the wives of the enemies, or else they would be killed for not raping them (Gaca, 2011). Moreover, the Greeks took it to another level not by only mass raping women, but by raping underage girls too (Gaca, 2011). Textual evidence attests to the rape of Artemis worshippers, who would've been five to ten years old (Gaca, 2011). Gang raping to death is also attested in Greek literature as well as several other parts of the ancient world (Gaca, 2016).

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There are many more examples to be mentioned, and much more details to be said, however, from these few examples, we can understand the varying ways women were affected during conflict, whether it was less violent or deadly. In all cases, women were subjected to enslavement, assault, rape, and much more. It is very important to study the lives of women in antiquity, especially during conflicts, so we can draw comparisons to the present and understand the evolution of women and conflict through time. Unfortunately, most of history was written by men, and their accounts often don't reflect the condition of women and the problems they face, which is also reflected during the post-conflict situation of women.

In conclusion, all the examples mentioned don't seem too foreign to us, we are familiar with the forms of violence exerted on women during conflict. Since antiquity, men have been mistreating women and using them to assert their dominance, take advantage of their weaker physical strength, and as a tool to take revenge on men. Sadly, these ways are still used today, and we can draw many modern parallels with the mistreatment women used to endure in antiquity. It seems very strange to me that throughout all these thousands of years, only in recent history did the rise for women's rights began. I believe that studying the lives of these ancient women would be the least we can do to bring the minimum amount of justice to them; however, we can never truly know the brutality and violence they actually went through because of the limitations we face. We might not have physical evidence for all the abuse each one of these women went through, but we don't need it to feel the amount of pain and torture they experienced, and we must not forget them when fighting for women's rights today.

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