REVILING AND MONOMACHY AS BATTLE-PRELUDES IN ANCIENT WARFARE

by J. J. Glück

(University of South Africa)

In battle accounts of ancient literature we often encounter two rather strange phenomena:
(a) an exchange of abuse and taunting between the two opposing lines,
(b) individual and group combats.

These apparently peculiar customs seem to have been common practice with the peoples around the Mediterranean basin up to about the first half of the first millennium B.C. They were noted by historians, ancient and modern (indeed they are much too frequent to be overlooked), but they were somewhat glossed over.¹ The moderns, as a rule, seem to agree with the opinion of the ancients who claimed that swearing and cussing was in concert with heated emotions² and that duel combats were fought by chosen warriors instead of an all-out battle between the factions in order to save unnecessary bloodshed.³ Some moderns again see in the duels parallels to knight-combats of mediaeval times⁴—a rather unfortunate anachronism.

¹. The only special, though indirect, attention of merit was given to monomachy by Y. Yadin, *Let the Youths Play*, Jerusalem 1947, a monograph demonstrating the analogy between the hitherto obscure verses in I Sam. 2: 12–17 and their connexion with some reliefs discovered at Tel-Halaf. However, Yadin’s interest lay mainly in the fighting methods employed in duels and not in the motives for the fighting themselves. Cf. Y. Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Discovery*, London 1963, pp. 71–73, 267, 354.

². Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* (to which all future references will be) III 19.1.


The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that both reviling and mono­
machy were preludes to battles in primitive warfare and were characteristic
of societies in an early or arrested stage of civilisation, marked by a total
lack of military discipline. Some of the examples quoted below were actually
recorded by such societies, others, notably those from the Iliad and from
Roman history, are indicative of earlier legends and historical retrospection.

The termination of this pre-organisation stage may be loosely dated some
time in the first half of first millennium B.C. However, in Egypt and in
Mesopotamia state organisations of a nationwide character with standing
armies were mostly brought about already in the third and second mil­
lennium B.C. Similar organisations of comparable size and strength followed,
which survived for lesser or longer periods. But in the overall picture of
the ancient world these were the exceptions rather than the rule. Furthermore,
regular units, where and when they existed, were mostly employed
for maintaining internal security, though in times of war they might have
formed the nucleus of the fighting force, the bulk of which consisted un­
doubtedly of called-up men.

In those days the bearing of arms was the privilege and duty of free citizens
but their ranks were occasionally swelled by second and third class subjects.
The difference between trained and volunteer forces at that time was such
that a few dozen regulars could tilt the balance of power in the wars between
the city-states.

5. Q. Wright, A Study of War, Chicago 1951, Vol. I pp. 39, 144, et passim; M. R. David,
The Evolution of War, New-Haven 1929, passim; Spaulding, Nickerson and Wright, op.
cit. pp. 1–265; H. Delbrueck, Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Ge­

6. In this respect, the pictorial presentations of antiquity offer us a clearer view of the
ancient armies than literary descriptions do. Cf. the reliefs from Lagash (middle of the
third millennium b.c.; see E. de Sarzec, Découvertes en Chaldée, Paris 1884–1912, pp.
193–194), and the groups of statuettes from the Middle-Kingdom of Egypt (turn of the
1954, p. 55 (see also pp. 95–96). In these, units appear uniformly equipped, marching
in army order, which are clear signs of proper military organisation and training.


8. J. B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts (hereafter referred to as ANET), Prince­
ton 1955, pp. 18–22—The Story of Sinuhe, line 19. The happenings should have taken
place in the 20th century b.c. Cf. the guard units of king David and his house, referred
to as the Cherethites and Pelethites (11 Sam. 8:18, 20:7 et passim. According to 15:18,
Idem, in David’s time they numbered six hundred men—a most acceptable figure.)

9. Cf. ANET p. 281, the Annals of Adad-Nirari III, ‘In the fifth year . . . I called up the
country . . . to march against . . .’

10. The Ancient East had an elaborate ‘caste system’ as the Babylonian, Assyrian,
Hittite and other law-codes indicate. Cf. the Helots, the neodamotoi, the mothones etc.
of Sparta.

11. See the El-Amarna letters, J. A. Knudtzon, Die El-Amarna Tafeln, Leipzig 1907–
1915. In letter No. 244, Biridiya, the king of Megiddo, asks Pharaoh for ‘one hundred
soldiers’. No. 289 mentions the dispatch of ‘twenty’ soldiers; Abdu-Heba, the king of
Jerusalem, asks for ‘fifty’ soldiers ‘to guard the land”—and this in times of war.

26
Up to the time indicated above the greatest part of the Mediterranean world was covered by tiny city-states and confederacies which, for economic reasons, had to rely on poorly equipped volunteer forces of little or no training and of even less discipline. The lack of military preparedness invariably invited aggression from neighbours and a semi-permanent state of war resulted, which prevailed over practically the entire region.  

We may safely assume that in emergencies people in ancient times defended their cities and families as readily as civilised people do today; but most of the wars of ancient times were not born of emergency and did not always grow in proportion to develop into a national crisis. Most of them were conducted for gain; some for gains of a permanent nature, others just for plunder and loot. To such an end sudden attacks by ruse, from ambushes and under cover of darkness, suited the purpose best, thus avoiding open warfare and heavy loss of life—hardly warranted by the objectives.

The course of these campaigns or expeditions might conceivably have followed this pattern: the raiders, busy with looting, usually tarried, thus allowing those attacked to effect hasty measures of defence; or rumours of

12. See Die El-Amarna Tafeln, I ff. Cf. Jd. 17:6; 21:25 'In those days there was no king in Israel; each man did what was right in his own eyes'. While this statement refers to individual lawlessness, the books, however, reveal a general state of piracy on a tribal and communal level. Cf. Judges and Samuel, passim.

Cf. the relationship of Sparta and Messene, in the 8th and 7th century B.C., and indeed in the whole of the Peloponnesian peninsula long before and after. Cf. Thucydides I 4-5. During the first few centuries of Rome's history, intermittent wars between the petty states took place with the sole aim of material gain. This is expressly mentioned in Dio Cassius Book I 5.5-7 (and in Zonaras 7.6.7 and 7.10) and amply demonstrated by Livy (III 15.4 et passim), Dionysius, Dio Cassius and others who described the early times of Roman history. J. B. Bury, A History of Greece, London 1951, pp. 53-56; H. H. Scullard, A History of the Roman World, from 735 to 146 B.C., London 1951, pp. 33-38.


14. The yearly campaigns of the Pharaohs into Palestine and Syria furnish us with clear examples. Cf. the Annals of Thut-Mose III, from Karnak; cf. Sam. 30; II Sam. 3:22; Iliad IX 277-306 (an enumeration of the spoils offered to Achilles as incentive to join in the fighting). Livy II 48-49, III 3.7-8, 7.2-3, et passim; Grotius, De Jure Belli ac Pacis III 6.12, 14, 123. Furthermore, it seems to have been the custom to strip the vanquished foe then and there during the fighting: Iliad VI 67-71; VIII 165-166, et passim.

Armies in ancient times were followed or accompanied by a host of merchants to whom booty was sold. Iliad VII 467-475 speaks of trading loot for wine. Since Troy was not yet taken, the Achalans must have looted the countryside, sold the people into slavery, and stripped the dead. Cf. Deut. 21:10-14; Macc. 3:41; II Macc. 8:11, 25; Josephus, Antiquities XII 7.3.

15. Cf. an ancient version of Ali Baba, enacted by the Egyptians in taking Joppa in the 15th century B.C., ANET pp. 22-23; the narrative of the Trojan horse, Odyssey VIII; Josh. 8:18-24; the ambush of Gracchus in the Aequian war (Dionysius X 23); the night assault of the Gauls on the Capitol (Diodorus XIV 116, Livy V 47), and that of Appius Herdonius (Livy III 15.5).
the impending attack might have leaked out, in which case both sides found themselves arrayed in the field opposite each other. Whatever the exact circumstances leading up to a battle might have been, they seldom fired the belligerents with heroism to the point of ready self-sacrifice. Frequently they did not even harbour real hatred against each other, as they were neighbours and some were even relatives. Yet for either side to abandon the field would mean an acknowledgement of defeat, which with the breaking up of battle formations in the process of retreat, would invariably invite the other side to charge. Orders to attack would be of no avail; if they were obeyed at all, the attack would be launched in such a half-hearted way that it would not only be ineffectual but also demoralising. As mentioned above, these irregulars had little training or discipline. Under these circumstances the two armies seemingly reached an impasse.

At this juncture human nature usually saved the situation. While not daring to fly into attack, they concealed their apprehensions by flinging lusty abuse, scorn and curses at each other. The taunting of the opponent might have had a psychological effect on both parties—it piqued the foe-man and it inspired the abuser himself.

As to the actual wording of the vituperations we can expect no outspoken truthfulness. The abuses were pronounced in heated moments in an all male company of troops, but the stories about them were recounted from generation to generation, on timeless occasions, and to mixed audiences of all ranks. Other accounts again were collected and edited by ecclesiastical bodies who sifted their material in line with a characteristically puritan taste.

16. According to Zonaras 7.6, op. cit., the two trios of brothers who were chosen to fight in duel-combat, the Pubilioratii and the Curiatii, were first cousins. Cf. also Dionysius III 13.4, and also H. Spiess, Menschenart und Heldentum in Homers Ilias, Paderborn 1912, pp. 69–70.

17. According to I Sam. 17:16, the armies of the Philistines and of the Israelites faced each other for forty days before the combat between David and Goliath took place. There was a similar deadlock also in the Roman-Alban war before the generals decided on the duel-combat (Dionysius III 4.3).

18. Homer, Iliad VIII 161–166, 175–184; Hector’s chiding of Diomede is described as having taken place in the midst of battle, but for practical reasons this could not have been so. As the subsequent narrative indicates, the battle of words took place prior to that of the swords; cf. idem, XVII 141–169; Livy III 2.9; I Sam. 17 (the whole chapter), II Sam. 5:6 (cf. Josephus, Antiquities VII 3), 23–9. In at least two places the challenge is frustrated by ignoring the abuse—II Sam. 16:5–18—and the mockery—Neh. 3:33–37. Cf. G. Deecke, De Hectoris et Alacis Certamine Singulari, passim; F. von Trojan, Handlungsstypen im Epos: die homerische Ilias, p. 10, 50.


20. This certainly applies to the Homeric legends and the sagas of early Roman history; as to Sinuhe, he told his story, the challenge and the duel, to no lesser personalities than Pharaoh, the Queen and the royal children.

The contests of words comprised three distinct elements: ridicule, curse, and intimidation; but, of course, this was not a matter of convention—the words expressed a complex of rather mixed emotions. Nor was the heated exchange confined to words, but, as we learn from Iliad III 79–80, they also hurled stones and other missiles at each other.

The mutual chiding and taunting, described above, took place between the opposing lines and by those individuals who ventured forth and approached the enemy lines or who were sent out for various tasks on the field between the two armies. One of these tasks was to fight in single combats against chosen champions of the opposite side—in monomachy.

Monomachy appears to have been an ancient military practice common to all the peoples around the Mediterranean basin. The earliest recorded instance comes from Egyptian literature which, however, describes happenings in Palestine (or Syria). Two pictorial presentations of what appears to be single combat have been found at Beni-Hasan and at Tel-El-Fara—this is the opinion of Yadin. Next comes Homer's Iliad. It offers us the most vivid descriptions of a whole series of monomachy; in fact, Homer gave much more prominence to individual combats than to the subsequent general fighting. From the 11th and 9th centuries B.C. we have examples of monomachy in the Bible and from Tel-Halaf respectively. Our examples of pre-battle combat, in the western part of the region, come from the Iliad...
and from the story of the Roman-Alban wars.\textsuperscript{33}

It is explicitly stated in literature\textsuperscript{34} that these duels were fought instead of the war,\textsuperscript{35} but in fact they were mere preludes to all-out battles;\textsuperscript{36} the death-struggle of the combatants inflamed passions in the onlookers and if the combat was protracted, they did not wait for its termination but joined in the fighting.\textsuperscript{37}

Monomachy was fought in two distinctly different ways: one was fought with conventional weapons and in a conventional manner,\textsuperscript{38} and the other is best described as ‘suicide combat’,\textsuperscript{39} since neither of the opponents was likely to survive the encounter. Such a duel is concisely described in II Sam. 2: 13–17 and is also vividly illustrated by a (presumably) Canaanite ostracon\textsuperscript{40} and by two reliefs from Tel-Halaf. The description reads: ‘And Abner with an army went out to Gibeon . . . and Joab went out (with an army) and they met at the pool of Gibeon, and they kept sitting, these on this side of the pool and those on that side of the pool.\textsuperscript{41} (Finally) Abner said to Joab: “Let the young men (the soldiers) arise and play in front of us”, and Joab said: “Let them arise (and do)”. And they arose and went out in (equal) number—twelve . . . (of each side) . . . And they grabbed hold of each other’s heads and\textsuperscript{42} they thrust their swords into each other’s sides, and they fell down together.’ By holding each other’s heads (or hair) they pinned each other down; they could neither elude nor parry with the hand their simultaneous thrust. Since there could hardly be victors in these ‘games’ it could only serve as a call to attack; indeed, the above account continues with a description of the fight between the two armies which followed.\textsuperscript{43}

Duellists in conventional monomachy of the ‘Homeric’ type were equipped and fought in the fashion of the day and they also had to fight until one of them was mortally wounded, and eventually killed, though according to the \textit{Iliad} a combatant could run the gauntlet of scorn and retire. But in any case, one of them stood a fair chance of survival. Never-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item The duel of the Publiloratii and the Curiatii, cf. n. 16.
\item Homer, \textit{Iliad} III 321–323; Zonaras 7.6; Dionysius III 11–12.
\item This appears to have been the case in the Alban-Roman war (see above); similarly, Sinuhe (op. cit. line 140) by slaying his challenger effectively stopped any desire in the people for further bloodshed.
\item Throughout the \textit{Iliad}; cf. I Sam. 17:52; II 2:17.
\item \textit{Iliad} XVI 762 ff. and also 806–817.
\item Cf. The story of Sinuhe, op. cit.; all the encounters of the type under discussion in the \textit{Iliad}; II Sam. 17; the ‘certamen’ of Publiloratii and Curiatii, op. cit.
\item Biblical Hebrew called it ‘youth’s game’ or ‘soldiers’ play’: cf. II Sam. 2:14 \textit{yaqāmū na’ hame’ārim wīkahaqū = ‘let the youth (the soldiers) arise and play’.
\item From the Egyptian fortress in Tel-El-Fara’—19th century B.C.: Yadin, op. cit., pp. 72, 257.
\item Evidently neither side risked the first move to fight or flee.
\item Apparently at a given sign.
\item II Sam. 2:17.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
theless, they had to be cajoled\textsuperscript{14} or persuaded with promises of rewards\textsuperscript{45} to fight in single combat. But there can be little doubt that a craving for recognition of personal valour also played a great part in volunteering for monomachy.\textsuperscript{46} 

According to the above, two different types of monomachy were practised among the ancients. The 'Homeric' type was in vogue in the West, Greece and Rome. This was known and practised also in the East, and Yadin may be right in assuming that it was introduced, or re-introduced, in the East by the Aegeans.\textsuperscript{47} However, the duels peculiar to the East were the 'suicide combats' which appear to have been unknown in the West. Both methods of single combat led, as a rule, to the commencement of hostilities—on their own they seldom solved any real issue at stake.

Neither reviling nor monomachy was, at its inception, part of a planned military stratagem, but they developed into a battle-routine and survived until they were eliminated by the introduction of professional soldiery and disciplined and well-trained armies of conscripts. Until then, however, the above two practices helped to break the apparent deadlock between the opposing armies, caused by want of discipline and training, and by the lack of conviction on the part of troops as to the purpose and outcome of the wars they were fighting.

\textsuperscript{14} Iliad III 30–59.
\textsuperscript{45} Idem, IX 254–306; cf. I Sam. 17:25–27. According to 30, idem, David appears to have asked twice about Saul's promise.
\textsuperscript{46} According to Dionysius III 14.3 there was a rivalry among the brave as to who should be chosen for the single combat. Yet in 15.2 we read that the Horatii were compelled—δι' αυτοῦ— to fight; cf. also 3–4, idem. Cf. W. Jaeger: \textit{Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture}, Oxford 1946, Vol. I pp. 5–8.
\textsuperscript{47} Yadin, op. cit., p. 267.
Acta Classica

Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: