



## THE BRONZE HARVESTER: RAVAGING AND PLUNDERING IN GREEK WARFARE\*

### ABSTRACT

*This article argues that the purpose of ravaging in Greek warfare was not to goad the enemy into fighting or to cause systematic economic harm but to facilitate plundering. The cereal harvest was commonly chosen as a time for invasion, because it maximized the amount of plunder an invading force could expect to find in the enemy countryside. While ravagers were unlikely to cause permanent economic harm to a community as a whole, they could imperil the livelihoods of individual farmers, both directly through theft and destruction and indirectly by preventing farmers from processing the harvest in a timely fashion. This explains the consistent fear of plundering and ravaging present in our sources.*

**Keywords:** warfare; raiding; plundering; ravaging; agriculture; ancient economy

Classical Greek armies waged war not only against enemy armies but also against the very land of their adversaries.<sup>1</sup> Invading armies cut olive groves, burnt crops, trampled vines and killed any who opposed them. Our ancient sources seem to take this sort of ravaging as a serious threat. Military manuals contained advice for mitigating it, men staked their lives in battle to prevent it and cities surrendered rather than endure it.<sup>2</sup> At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, outside observers believed Athens could hold out for only two or three years if the Peloponnesians ravaged Attica (Thuc. 7.28.3). Even the wealthiest city in Greece, they surmised, could not survive the destruction of her countryside. The problem, of course, is that these armchair *stratēgoi* were wrong. Despite repeated invasions, Athens survived. Indeed, she fought on even after the Spartans and their allies installed themselves in the fortress of Decelea and began to ravage and plunder Attica year-round.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps ravaging was less effective than it initially appears.

In his influential *Greek Warfare and Agriculture*, Hanson presented a number of practical reasons why the destruction of Greek agriculture (at economically significant levels) was difficult to achieve. The primary point of ravaging, he argued, was not to inflict economic harm, but to goad the farmer-hoplites of the enemy city to leave the

\* Many thanks to J.E. Lendon and E. Meyer, as well as to the anonymous reader and *CQ*'s editor.

<sup>1</sup> Frequently cited works: L. Foxhall, 'Farming and fighting in ancient Greece', in J. Rich and G. Shipley (edd.), *War and Society in the Greek World* (London, 1993), 134–45; P. Halstead, *Two Oxen Ahead: Pre-Mechanized Farming in the Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2014); V.D. Hanson, *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998<sup>2</sup>); M. McHugh, *The Ancient Greek Farmstead* (Oxford, 2017); J.A. Thorne, 'Warfare and agriculture: the economic impact of devastation in Classical Greece', *GRBS* 42 (2001), 225–53.

<sup>2</sup> Manuals: Aen. Tact. 10.1–3, 16.4–7. Battle: Polyaeus, *Strat.* 2.12.1. Surrender: Plut. *Ages.* 22.5; Thuc. 4.88.1.

<sup>3</sup> Thuc. 7.27.5; *Hell. Oxy.* 12.5.

safety of their walls and fight a decisive battle in some suitably flat space.<sup>4</sup> His arguments have been generally well received.<sup>5</sup> Few have met Hanson in the open field with their own article or chapter-length treatments.<sup>6</sup> Many more have been content to play the peltast: throwing a well-aimed dart or two at Hanson's thesis, but otherwise standing aside.<sup>7</sup> The central difficulty is that, on the one hand, Hanson's reasoning about the logistics of ravaging appears sound. Hanson was himself a farmer, and who among his academic colleagues—more accustomed to encountering their olives on the toothpick than on the branch—had the experience to dispute him? On the other hand, our sources do seem to think ravaging was harmful. When Brasidas appeared unexpectedly outside the walls of Acanthus, the Acanthians voted to revolt from Athens partly because they were afraid of losing their vintage (Thuc. 4.88.1). When the Acarnanians learned that the Spartans were preparing to ravage their territory for the second year running, they decided that their landlocked territory 'would be just as besieged by those who destroyed their grain as they would be by an army encamped around them', and sued for peace (Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.1). A rule may be proved only by so many exceptions.

What I hope to do is reconcile Hanson's (generally correct) arguments about the difficulty of ravaging with our nagging sense that ravaging was efficacious. The key to this reconciliation is to consider plundering alongside ravaging. Hanson strictly separates these two endeavours, but the ancient Greeks themselves considered them inseparable.<sup>8</sup> Acknowledging plunder as the primary goal of invading armies better explains our evidence. The primary goods sought by plundering the countryside were slaves, livestock and grain. The harvest season was the preferred time for invasions not out of a quixotic hope of arriving in enemy territory at the precise moment fields

<sup>4</sup> Hanson (n. 1), xiii.

<sup>5</sup> C. Chandezon, 'L'économie rurale et la guerre', in F. Prost (ed.), *Armées et sociétés de la Grèce classique. Aspects sociaux et politiques de la guerre aux Ve et IVe s. av. J.-C.* (Paris, 1999), 195–208, at 200–1. Bibliography for earlier support may be found in J.A. Krasilnikoff, 'On the gardens and marginal lands of Classical Attica', in S. Isager and I. Nielsen (edd.), *Proceedings of the Danish Institute at Athens III* (Aarhus, 2000), 177–93, at 185 and S. Fachard and E.M. Harris, 'Introduction: destruction, survival, and recovery in the ancient Greek world', in S. Fachard and E.M. Harris, *The Destruction of Cities in the Ancient Greek World* (Cambridge, 2021), 1–33, at 6.

<sup>6</sup> Notable here are Foxhall (n. 1), who argues that the infrastructure of the ancient countryside (especially buildings) was easier to destroy than Hanson acknowledged, and Thome (n. 1), who argues that cereals were easier to burn—and the evacuation of the countryside in the presence of an enemy army more difficult to achieve—than in Hanson's model.

<sup>7</sup> I.G. Spence, 'Perikles and the defense of Attika during the Peloponnesian War', *JHS* 110 (1990), 91–109 thinks that crops, trees and buildings were not as vulnerable to fire as often assumed. A. Burford, *Land and Labor in the Greek World* (Baltimore, 1993), 159–62, concludes that Hanson is generally right about agrarian resilience, but emphasizes the possibility for temporary harm. H. van Wees, *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (London, 2004), 121–4, generally agrees with Hanson, with the caveat that harm to individual farmers may have been very great. P. Krentz, 'War', in P. Sabin, H. van Wees and M. Whitby (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (Cambridge, 2007), 1.147–85, at 171, and L. Rawlings, *The Ancient Greeks at War* (Manchester, 2007), 148 reach similar conclusions. J.D. Hughes, 'Warfare and environment in the ancient world', in B. Campbell and L.A. Tritle (edd.), *The Oxford Handbook of Warfare in the Classical World* (Oxford, 2013), 128–40, at 131–2, accepts Hanson's agrarian expertise but wonders about accounts of cut down olive groves.

<sup>8</sup> Hanson (n. 1), 209–10 considered ravaging and plundering to be separate endeavours, defining ravaging as 'more a tactical option entailing destruction', while plundering was an activity that showed 'an economic interest in material acquisition'. But he too acknowledges that the two activities were frequently performed together (p. 34), and that plundering was probably the more economically harmful of them (p. 15).

might be burnt, but in the real and reasonable expectation of finding this sort of plunder in large quantities at that time of year. Soldiers cut down trees during the high heat of the Mediterranean summer not to vex one luckless farmer, but to build fortifications that would allow them to extract more loot in greater safety. Because the goods thus stolen were a key element in the survival strategies of Greek farmers, an enemy invasion posed an unacceptable risk that typically compelled the defenders to fight or concede. Thinking of ravaging in this way explains why the Greeks ravaged their enemies and dreaded the prospect of being ravaged in turn. Rather than seeing the Classical period as a unique and especially agonal phase of Greek warfare, we ought to see a fundamental continuity in the aims of invaders from Nestor to Nabis.

This fundamental continuity is an interest in plunder. Plundering is so prevalent in our sources that Pritchett's collection of the ancient evidence for the practice runs to over 400 pages.<sup>9</sup> The evidence is so extensive because the rewards were so high. As Trundle put it, 'plunder produced wealth on a far greater scale than other economic activities'.<sup>10</sup> Cities, obviously, provided the best and greatest loot. But the countryside was not without its share of spoils. The Greeks took it for granted that a desire for plunder from the countryside motivated both men and states in wartime. In the *Iliad*, Nestor boasts of the many herds he had stolen from the Eleans in his youth (11.670–84). Centuries later, the ambassadors of the Macedonian king Philip II tried to entice Thebes into war against Athens with the prospect of 'Attic cattle, slaves and other goods' (Dem. 18.213). When the Spartan king Nabis wished to provoke a war with neighbouring Megalopolis, he organized a raid to steal their cattle (Polyb. 13.8.7). The writers of military manuals assumed soldiers in the countryside would want to plunder and that this drive would present either a danger or an opportunity to their readers. Onasander advised that cavalry and infantry forces with 'no concern at all for booty' should accompany light-armed or unarmed raiders (10.8). Conversely, Aeneas Tacticus advised defenders to allow invading forces to plunder and 'satisfy their greed'. Once the invaders were overconfident and inebriated, he observed, they would be much easier to dispatch (16.5–6). Bernard did not err when he wrote that 'la guerre est un continuel brigandage'.<sup>11</sup>

Armies going into territory that seemed either especially wealthy or especially easy to plunder were sometimes accompanied by great masses of lightly armed (that is, poor) men.<sup>12</sup> If the prospects for plundering seemed especially fine, entire armies might join campaigns. The Spartan king Agis invaded the Elean countryside around 401 B.C.E., 'cutting and burning the countryside, and a great number of cattle and prisoners were captured from the countryside. Hearing this, many others of the Arcadians and Achaeans, came voluntarily to join the army and took a share of the plunder. This campaign became, as it were, a great provisioning for the Peloponnese' (Xen. *Hell.* 3.2.26). As Chaniotis puts it, 'a very thin line—if any—separated war from maritime and land expeditions aimed at collecting booty'.<sup>13</sup> As in Agis' invasion of Elis, the collection

<sup>9</sup> W.K. Pritchett, *The Greek State at War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1991), 5.68–504.

<sup>10</sup> M. Trundle, 'Coinage and the economics of the Athenian empire', in J. Armstrong (ed.), *Circum Mare: Themes in Ancient Warfare* (Leiden, 2016), 65–79, at 65.

<sup>11</sup> A. Bernard, *Guerre et violence dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1999), 341.

<sup>12</sup> e.g. Thuc. 2.31.2; Plut. *Ages.* 31.1–2. Cf. Rawlings (n. 7), 149–55; M. Trundle, 'Wealth and the logistics of Greek warfare: food, pay, and plunder', in L.L. Brice (ed.), *New Approaches to Greek and Roman Warfare* (Hoboken, NJ, 2019), 17–28, at 24.

<sup>13</sup> A. Chaniotis, *War in the Hellenistic World: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford, 2005), 134; J.W.I. Lee, 'Daily life in Classical Greek armies, c. 500–330 B.C.E.', in L.L. Brice (ed.), *New*

of booty and the ravaging of enemy territory often went hand in hand, the inseparable yokemates of war.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it is when ravaging does not occur alongside plundering that it stands in need of explanation. The philosopher-kings of Plato's Republic nobly confined themselves only to stealing the harvests from their Greek enemies because of their shared heritage (5.470a–b). The Lydian king Alyattes refrained from destroying the farmhouses of the citizens of Miletus so that he could return year after year and find produce (Hdt. 1.17). It is the lack of destruction that required explanation for Herodotus.

Armies were after plunder and destroyed property in their pursuit of it. Not all plunder was created equal. The three great sources of wealth from the countryside were, in descending order of value, human captives, livestock and foodstuffs. Captives were valuable because they could either be ransomed or, more likely, sold into slavery.<sup>15</sup> Animals, especially cattle, were also worth taking. These had the added benefit of being capable of walking themselves to the farms of their new masters.<sup>16</sup> In terms of non-ambulatory loot, one was unlikely to find much of extremely high value: presuming there had been such goods in the countryside to begin with, the defenders were likely to have stashed them within the city walls at the first sign of trouble. Bulky products, such as cereals, were much more difficult to transport on short notice, and thus more likely to still be in the countryside when invaders arrived.<sup>17</sup> Agricultural produce may not have been as valuable as silver, but it could be put to immediate use as provisions. Greek soldiers in the Classical period typically went to war with only a few days' or—at most—weeks' worth of rations, so the plundering of foodstuffs was both expected and necessary to keep an army in the field.<sup>18</sup>

The time of the year when plunderers were most likely to find the greatest quantity of men, livestock and food in the countryside was during the cereal harvest. In the Aegean, this harvest occurred in the early summer.<sup>19</sup> Scholars have long recognized the association between the cereal harvest and the invasion of the countryside.<sup>20</sup> The great invasions of Attica in the first years of the Peloponnesian War were timed to coincide with this harvest.<sup>21</sup> For scholars arguing that invading armies were solely or primarily motivated by a desire to destroy enemy goods, then the purpose of this timing must have been to maximize the harm they were able to inflict. Theoretically, cereal crops could be harmed by cutting them at almost any stage during their growth. But cutting cereals was a woefully inefficient means of inflicting harm: the process of cutting was time-consuming, arduous and exposed the men doing it to danger from counterattacks. Burning cereals was easier, safer and far more dramatic. Green cereals contain too much moisture to burn easily. Only a field of ripe grain was able to go up all at once in a single efficient

*Approaches to Greek and Roman Warfare* (Hoboken, NJ, 2019), 39–51, at 40 also recognizes 'the explicit desire for booty and plunder' as a difference between ancient and modern soldiers.

<sup>14</sup> Diod. Sic. 14.62.5, 15.65.5; Just. *Epit.* 24.1.1; Lys. 7.6; Onasander 6.12; Plut. *Ages.* 31.1–2, *Cleom.* 25.4; Polyaeus, *Strat.* 8.36.1; Polyb. 2.32.4, 4.45.7, 16.24.7–8, 21.10.12–13; Thuc. 7.49.2; Xen. *Hell.* 1.2.4–5, 3.2.26, 5.4.42, 6.5.37. Cf. Hanson (n. 1), 34 n. 24.

<sup>15</sup> On the fate of captives, see Pritchett (n. 9), 5.203–312, especially 5.223–4 and K. Gaca, 'The andrapodizing of war captives in Greek historical memory', *TAPhA* 140 (2010), 117–61.

<sup>16</sup> Pritchett (n. 9), 5.198–203.

<sup>17</sup> Thorne (n. 1), 243–6.

<sup>18</sup> On the rations, see Hanson (n. 1), 33 and van Wees (n. 7), 104. When one of the Peloponnesian invasions of Attica arrived before the grain was ripe, it was forced to depart early (Thuc. 4.2.1).

<sup>19</sup> A. Bresson, *The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy: Institutions, Markets, and Growth in the City-States* (Princeton, 2016), at 121.

<sup>20</sup> Hanson (n. 1), 38–9; Thorne (n. 1), 228–33; Rawlings (n. 7), 144–5 and 151–7.

<sup>21</sup> e.g. Thuc. 2.19, 2.47, 428, 3.1, 3.26, 4.2.

and satisfying conflagration. Thus, the argument runs, invasions were tied to the cereal harvest to increase the likelihood of finding combustible grain, and thus maximize the harm done by ravaging.<sup>22</sup>

The problem, as Hanson recognized, was that the period of time in which grain might be burnt was brief. The Greeks grew both barley and wheat, each of which ripens at different rates.<sup>23</sup> These rates of ripening are strongly influenced by elevation and precipitation, with low-lying, wetter fields potentially ripening weeks before higher, drier ones. As a rule, Greece is hilly, and the rainfall is unpredictable. The territory of even a modestly-sized *polis* could contain substantial elevation changes, and thus experience dramatic differences in temperature and precipitation in almost adjacent regions.<sup>24</sup> Twentieth-century Greek farmers had difficulty keeping tabs on the state of their own fields, relying on word of mouth and close observation of their neighbours to determine when their more distant holdings were ready to be harvested.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore unlikely that there was ever a period of time in which all, or even the greater part, of a city's fields were ignitable simultaneously. Even if such a period did exist, the odds of enemies knowing of its existence and being able to act on that knowledge in time seem small.

The ancient Greeks, being for the most part farmers, were presumably aware of all this. But many of the same factors that rendered the Greek cereal harvest difficult to burn in the field also made it more vulnerable to being stolen. The differing rates of ripening meant that the cereal harvesting period was prolonged (later Greek farmers required about four to seven weeks to take in their harvests).<sup>26</sup> Dry grain has a propensity to lose its seeds, in a process known as shedding. This means that it is best to move grain as little as possible until it is fully processed, as any transportation entails loss by shedding. Both ancient and modern Greek farmers therefore processed their cereal harvests on threshing floors scattered throughout the countryside.<sup>27</sup> Even ripe grain retains enough moisture that storing it immediately after cutting it is an invitation to fungal attack and weevils. So harvested crops must be left to dry either in the field or on the threshing floor.<sup>28</sup> The experiences of twentieth-century Greek farmers suggest that this drying process could take days or even weeks, depending on the weather.<sup>29</sup>

Once dry, the harvest was spread on the threshing floor and trampled by oxen, separating the edible grain from the rest of the plant in a process known as threshing. The resulting product could be winnowed by tossing it into the wind, separating out

<sup>22</sup> Hanson (n. 1), 52.

<sup>23</sup> Hanson (n. 1), 49–52; Burford (n. 7), 127.

<sup>24</sup> H.A. Forbes, "'We have a little of everything:'" the ecological basis of some agricultural practices in Methana, Trizinia', in M. Dimen and E. Friedl (edd.), *Regional Variation in Modern Greece and Cyprus: Toward a Perspective on the Ethnography of Greece* (New York, 1976), 236–50, at 246 reported a three-week difference in the ripening of wheat between low-lying and elevated fields in modern Methana. Cf. Foxhall (n. 1), 140.

<sup>25</sup> Halstead (n. 1), 71.

<sup>26</sup> Halstead (n. 1), 104. There can be substantial differences between the pre-mechanized farming practices of different periods. But, in this instance, it is the geography and climate of Greece itself that imposes certain constraints upon the cereal harvest, and these constraints were unlikely to have been drastically different in the past.

<sup>27</sup> P. Halstead, 'Agrarian ecology in the Greek islands: time stress, scale and risk', *JHS* 109 (1989), 41–55, at 49; Foxhall (n. 1), 138; M. McHugh (n. 1), 146–7.

<sup>28</sup> T.W. Gallant, *Risk and Survival in Ancient Greece* (Stanford, 1991), 97–8 reports that 50–80% of cereal stored without drying is lost.

<sup>29</sup> Halstead (n. 1), 91–2.

the grain from the chaff. Once more, the weather imposed restraints: threshing required dry heat, winnowing a consistent breeze. This reliance on the weather could increase the time the harvest remained exposed. The use of oxen for threshing also meant that, during the cereal harvest, one could expect to encounter cattle conveniently scattered about the countryside at threshing floors and donkeys or carts thoughtfully loaded with grain by their former owners. The modern scholarly consensus is that ancient farmers owned fragmented properties spread across the countryside.<sup>30</sup> If this was the case, then one could also reasonably expect to find those farmers dispersed, distracted and exhausted during the harvest season, as they laboured to bring in the harvests from their various fields as each field ripened.

The possibility of finding people, cattle and grain all exposed in the countryside can explain why armies chose to invade during the harvest season. Epaminondas, for example, sent his cavalry to attack Mantinea in the expectation that all of the Mantinean livestock and people would be outside of the walls because it was the cereal harvest season (Xen. *Hell.* 7.5.14). The Athenians likewise conducted a nighttime raid into Lydia ‘when the grain was ripe’, during which they burnt villages, and took slaves, money and other plunder (1.2.4). If they had hoped to provoke the Lydians into agonal hoplite combat with this action, they were disappointed.

Armies stole produce and sometimes took it back home with them. The chorus leader in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* complains that the Peloponnesians had broken open a chest of his containing six *medimnoi* of grain (625–31). The Spartans carried back grain from their midwinter invasion of the Argolid in 416/415 (Thuc. 6.7.1). When the Thespians successfully repelled a Theban raid, the hastily retreating Theban army was forced to abandon produce it had stolen from the Thespian countryside (Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.42). The Spartan king Areus ravaged Aitolia and ‘whatever he was unable to take away, he burnt’ (Just. *Epit.* 24.1.5). The Byzantines had to endure the sight of barbarian invaders who ‘destroy part of the crops, gathering and carrying off the rest’ (Polyb. 4.45.7). A late second-century B.C.E. inscription from Sestus complained of a war against Thracians, ‘in the course of which everything in the fields had been carried off’.<sup>31</sup> If the window in which grains might be burned was impossibly small, the window in which some portion of the harvest was ripe and ready to be stolen was terrifyingly large.

The gathering of plunder presented logistical difficulties.<sup>32</sup> As Aeneas Tacticus noted (above), it was expected that soldiers would find wine during their looting, and probably become inebriated. Even if all remained sober, plunder slowed down an army and led to the possibility of counterattacks.<sup>33</sup> During his invasion of Acarnania in 389, the Spartan king Agesilaus advanced so quickly that he was able to capture a great quantity of livestock and slaves, including nearly all the Acarnanian cattle. Engorged like a great

<sup>30</sup> S. Isager and J.E. Skydsgaard, *Ancient Greek Agriculture: An Introduction* (London, 1992), 128; Foxhall (n. 1), 136.

<sup>31</sup> *OGIS* 339 = M.M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World* (Cambridge, 1981), no. 215. Cf. Chaniotis (n. 13), 123.

<sup>32</sup> Naval expeditions, such as those undertaken by the Athenians during the opening years of the Peloponnesian War as reprisals for the ravaging of Attica, obviously had a further logistical hurdle to navigate when it came to getting plunder back home. But one could sell plunder to a nearby friendly community or use large transport ships designed to carry cavalry horses as ersatz plunder galleons. This may be how Chares got 300 cattle stolen from Lampasacus and Sigeum back to Athens in 356 (cf. Pritchett [n. 9], 5.198).

<sup>33</sup> As with the Thebans above (Xen. *Hell.* 5.4.42). The slowness of plunder-burdened armies made them vulnerable to attack (Aen. *Tact.* 16.11–12).

tick on the Acarnanian countryside, the Spartan army was unable to move camp until its plunder was sold to traveling traders. Unfortunately for the Spartans, their camp was adjacent to a steep hill, and this allowed the Acarnanians to achieve some measure of solace by throwing rocks down on the Spartans (Xen. *Hell.* 4.7.5–7). Any army that hoped to retain captured plunder while it continued to ravage the enemy countryside needed some way of protecting and corralling what they had taken already.

The obvious answer was a fortification of some sort, often an *ad hoc* palisade. The materials for such an edifice were locally sourced. The farmer hoping to recover his stolen property might be stymied by a wall made from his own trees.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes local structures were also plundered for their materials. The Athenians built a wall at Nisea using both trees and stones and bricks from countryside houses (Thuc. 4.69.2). Later, at Delion, the Athenians also made a rampart out of trees, vines and building materials (Thuc. 4.90). The cutting of trees for agonal purposes—to prove that the enemy was unwilling to come out and fight—did occur.<sup>35</sup> But most of the times we hear about tree-cutting it serves a strategic purpose.

If anything, there seems to have been an (understandable) reluctance to cut trees: the work was backbreaking and the reward was far less tangible than gaining loot through plundering. During his ravaging of Boeotia, Agesilaus compelled the allied army to cut trees by moving camp frequently (Polyaenus, *Strat.* 2.1.21). Only when their personal safety was at hazard were the men willing to engage in the arduous labour. Other armies seem to have been more willing to gamble with their lives. Thus, according to Xenophon, the Arcadians who joined the Thebans in the 370/369 plundering of Laconia neglected to fortify their camps so that they could spend more time plundering (Xen. *Hell.* 6.5.30). Tree cutting seems to have been so difficult that it was typically undertaken at scale only when the cut trees could be put to some practical use.<sup>36</sup>

This means that the quantity of trees cut was probably relatively small in most circumstances. The point of cutting was not to harm the agricultural output of the enemy city but to facilitate the extraction of that output. Discussions of the difficulty of fully killing olive trees or the time it would take to hew through entire groves miss the point.<sup>37</sup> Men wishing to construct a palisade as quickly and easily as possible were likely to ignore the gnarl-rooted lords of the olive groves and instead cut down younger trees. The cutting of enough trees (or vines) to make a palisade almost certainly left a visible scar on the terrain for a number of years.<sup>38</sup> This may very well be why

<sup>34</sup> Building defensive works from local supplies: Diod. Sic. 13.108.5; Hdt. 9.15.2, 9.97; Thuc. 4.69.2, 4.90.2, 6.66.2, 6.99.3; Xen. *Hell.* 5.23.9, 6.5.30.

<sup>35</sup> For example, after suffering a reversal at Lechaeum, Agesilaus burnt and cut fruit trees in the area to show ‘that no one wanted to come out against him’ (Xen. *Hell.* 4.5.10).

<sup>36</sup> The Spartans seem to have been especially fond of egregious tree cutting (Lys. 7.6–7 [Athens]; Xen. *Hell.* 4.6.5 [Acarnania], 5.3.3 [Olynthus]). The point may have been less to harm the enemy than to display Spartan excellence in an infamously arduous part of war typically done haphazardly and begrudgingly by other armies.

<sup>37</sup> Hanson (n. 1), 56–7, focusses on the difficulty of uprooting, burning or cutting olive trees in substantial quantities. One suspects that most of the economic damage done to the olive crop was done through harming immature trees. These were likely grown in nursery beds near farmsteads because they required extensive watering in order to survive, especially in the summer (Burford [n. 7], 131; L. Foxhall, *Olive Cultivation in Ancient Greece: Seeking the Ancient Economy* [Oxford, 2007], 101–2). Cf. Dem. 53.15, wherein the litigant complains that his opponent has destroyed his nursery beds like an enemy ravager.

<sup>38</sup> The speaker at Lys. 7.6–7 refers to olive groves destroyed by the Spartans and their allies during the Peloponnesian War.

‘cutting’ rather than ‘burning’ was the predominant metonymy for ravaging.<sup>39</sup> The experience of creating a palisade—or of seeing bare ground where olive trees had been in your youth—was indelible.

Ravaging was the handmaiden of plundering. Sometimes its purpose was to directly facilitate looting, as when trees were cut to make palisades. Perhaps more often, it simply entailed cruelties of convenience: the burning of an already pilfered farmhouse, or the smashing of *pithoi* once the wine inside had been drunk. We find far more examples of ravagers razing farmsteads than we do of them setting unharvested fields alight.<sup>40</sup> Such structures were far more amenable to being burnt. More importantly, soldiers were already enticed to target farmsteads as sources of plunder. Once such structures had been ransacked, there was little reason not to burn them. The harm done by ravaging was probably often incidental to the process of plundering rather than a central goal in and of itself.

This is not to say that ravaging did no harm. Asking whether the Greeks were able to utterly destroy the fields of their enemies—to create, as Hanson puts it, ‘permanent and systematic agricultural damage and subsequent economic collapse’—sets an impossible expectation.<sup>41</sup> Modern armies are rarely able to inflict this level of harm on their enemies. We ought not ask the Greek ravager with his sickle and firebrand to accomplish what those armed with B-17s and atom bombs could not.<sup>42</sup> That said, by deliberately targeting exposed goods during the harvest season, Greek armies could achieve the sort of harm that was permanent and ruinous from the perspective of an individual farmer, even if the community survived.

The possibility of a given cereal crop failing due to drought or some other natural misfortune was high.<sup>43</sup> Farmers needed to stockpile cereals in order to survive these bad years.<sup>44</sup> Invaders added a man-made disaster to Nature’s already bountiful store of evils. They achieved this first and foremost by their active plundering and ravaging. But even their very presence in the countryside harmed farmers by preventing those farmers from safely attending to their fields. A field left ripe and unharvested because of a sudden incursion would soon lose its grain to natural shedding, presuming it was not devoured by birds or spoiled by a sudden summer storm first. Grain left to dry on the threshing floor also needed to be protected from the damp and from wildlife just as much as it needed to be protected from human raiders.<sup>45</sup> Raiders caused economic harm both through their actions and through their mere presence in the field. Because this harm prevented farmers from stockpiling against regular but unpredictable natural disasters, the loss of even some portion of the cereal harvest left a farming family only one bad harvest away from penury, slavery or starvation.

We see evidence for this in the considerable concern ancient farmers displayed for the state of their fields during an invasion. Aristotle observed that in some cities men with property on the outskirts of the countryside were not allowed to participate in

<sup>39</sup> On the vocabulary, see Hanson (n. 1), 185–94; Spence (n. 7), 101.

<sup>40</sup> e.g. *Hell. Oxy.* 12.5; Thuc. 4.69.2, 4.90.2; Xen. *Hell.* 1.2.4–5, 6.2.6, 6.5.37. Cf. Hanson (n. 1), 72–5.

<sup>41</sup> Hanson (n. 1), xiii.

<sup>42</sup> On economic resilience, see Fachard and Harris (n. 5), 22–6.

<sup>43</sup> Wheat may have failed as frequently as one year in every four due to drought. Barley was more drought resistant, but hardly immune: P. Garnsey, *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis* (Cambridge, 1988), 9–13; Bresson (n. 19), 65.

<sup>44</sup> Garnsey (n. 43), 53–5; Halstead (n. 27), 52; Gallant (n. 28), 94–5; Thorne (n. 1), 242–3; McHugh (n. 1), 56.

<sup>45</sup> Halstead (n. 1), 71, 111–12.



votes for war, lest they place their private material interests above the need to defend the honour of the city (*Pol.* 1330a). Aeneas Tacticus warned the besieged general that farmers were likely to tarry in their fields even when the enemy was at hand and that the enemy would attempt to exploit the fear farmers felt for their personal property by setting ambushes to catch disorganized counterattacks (7.1, 16.4). During his invasion of Corcyra, the Spartan commander Mnasippus caught Corcyran farmers in this very fashion (*Xen. Hell.* 6.2.7–8). Those whose fields were plundered sometimes made rash decisions in their pursuit attempts to recapture their stolen goods. The Theban raid of Thespieae that ended with Theban muleteers hurriedly ditching stolen produce was a counterraid. The Theban countryside had been ravaged and plundered first, and the Theban response both aimed to avenge a slight and recoup a real loss (*Xen. Hell.* 5.4.42). The ability of plundering and ravaging to cloud the judgement of farmers suggests that enemy invaders were able to cause enough harm to elicit real fear.

Excluding plundering from an account of ravaging is a bit like removing the engine from a car and then pondering how it could possibly function as a vehicle. But once the engine has been restored, we can see how ravaging and plundering together could cause the sorts of reactions to invasions that we find in our sources, even though ravaging alone seems woefully impractical. The point of plundering and ravaging was not to cause permanent and systematic economic harm, but to steal the property of the enemy. But even if the active harm they accomplished was sporadic and inefficient, their mere presence in the countryside delayed the vital cereal harvest, leaving it vulnerable to weather, vermin, and shedding. Greek invaders were thus able to enrich themselves while also causing enough harm to frequently force their enemies to either the battlefield or the peace table.

*Santa Clara University*

NICHOLAS LINDBERG   
[nlindberg@scu.edu](mailto:nlindberg@scu.edu)