The meaning of war
Normative discourses on armed conflicts in the Greco-Roman world

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the dominant conceptions of war in classical antiquity and to emphasize their anchoring in the social and political organization specific to the world of Mediterranean city-states. The Greeks and Romans associated war (*polemos*, *bellum*) with the state, considering it a natural manifestation of relations between peoples with a political organization. Myths and accounts of sociogenesis, such as those of Hesiod, Plato, Aristotle and Lucretius, legitimized this vision by rooting it in a social and divine evolution. Through the *ius gentium* and the great Western theorists of war, we inherited this ancient meaning of armed conflict. The notion of "war" is in this respect an analytical category that lends itself only with difficulty to a scientific and comparative analysis of collective violence, particularly to the study of armed conflicts in wealthless societies.

Keywords: Social anthropology, Greco-Roman antiquity, city-state, opposition and conflict, war, laws of war, just war, *fides*.

The societies of classical antiquity are neither wealthless nor stateless societies. At a stretch, one might find a common trait among the Greeks, the Romans, the Aborigines of Australia, the Baruyas of Papua New Guinea and the Yanomami of the Amazon rainforest: they all live in structurally violent societies, where armed conflict is perceived as an ordinary state of relations between human communities (Chagnon, 1968, pp. 118–137; Garlan, 1972, pp. 3–5; Godelier, 1982, pp. 165–178; Darmangeat, 2020, pp. 221–222). This warlike tropism is part of a long evolutionary history and finds parallels in the animal world. It corresponds to what could be called an anthropological invariant, and more broadly to a tendency of living beings to favor—even within the same species—some over others, to distinguish "them" from "us": what the economists J.-K. Choi and S. Bowles (2007) call "parochialism", and the sociologist B. Lahire the "law of attraction of the like" *(loi d'attraction des semblables*; Lahire, 2023, pp. 401–406).

This propensity manifests itself in different ways depending on the time and place. In classical antiquity, it was part and parcel of a communal way of life that was completely unknown to "primitive" societies: the city-state—*polis* in Greek, *ciuitas* in Latin. Ancient authors thus referred to a community of citizens, endowed with political institutions whose functions included deciding whether to go to war against foreign communities. Here we are dealing with an ideal conception, valid for the two examples from which we draw the bulk of our documentation, classical Athens (5th–4th century BC) and the late Roman Republic (1st century BC). A city could fall under the control of a larger political entity (thereby losing its sovereignty) and continue to be referred to as such. In this case, administrative autonomy was sufficient to characterize it as a *polis* or *ciuitas*.

The debates on what is meant by "state" and "political unit" go beyond the scope of this article. The distinction I make between these two concepts is similar to that proposed by C. Schmitt (1992 [1932]). The political is "the decision-making center that controls the *friend-enemy* grouping". It is the scale on which the boundary between *us* and *them* is established, as well as the body that decides on the use of violence against *them*—the State corresponding to a later stage of development, that of the assertion of an *internal* monopoly of violence, based in particular on police repression and the replacement of the right to vengeance by public punishments.

While I readily admit that classical Athens and late-republican Rome are not modern states in the strict sense (insofar as the repressive apparatus remains embryonic

and certain extrajudicial practices are widespread), it nevertheless seems excessive to me to call into question the state nature of these communities as some historians have done (Finley, 1983, pp. 18–20; Zuiderhoek, 2017, pp. 149–159; Berent, 2000). This position neglects the fact that the submission of citizens to a collective decision to go to war (and its counterpart, the conscription of adult men) is, in itself, a major difference from stateless societies. Moreover, even if it remains imperfect, the State's effort to substitute public penalties for private justice is well documented in both Greece and Rome. This state monopoly on legitimate violence, in addition to depriving individuals and kinship groups of their ability to freely use armed force, carries specific concepts. It involves making a distinction between war itself, declared and controlled by state authorities, and other, more negatively perceived forms of conflict.

The purpose of this article is to study the origins of these discourses and, beyond that, to make a useful contribution to the current discussions on collective confrontations in wealthless societies. It is indeed necessary to start from clear definitions in order to construct a typology of conflicts, which can be used in a comparative perspective. However, the vocabulary we use today carries a certain classical heritage. In particular, there should be agreement on the exact meaning of the word "war", which continues to be used with a broad meaning in the social sciences, as well as (more curiously) in primatology and ethology (think of the famous "war of the Gombe chimpanzees" observed by J. Goodall, or the recent book by L. Bollache, *Quand les animaux font la guerre* ("when animals wage war"; [2023]). As I will argue here, this notion carries with it conceptions specific to the world of city-states of antiquity. As such, this is a category that lends itself rather poorly to the comparative analysis of collective violence, specifically to the study of armed conflicts in hunter-gatherer and pre-state agricultural societies.

1. THE WAR OF WORDS

The vocabulary associated with military activities, in both ancient Greek and Latin, is highly varied. However, the sources tend to favor a single signifier to designate armed conflicts between political communities.

1.1. The Greeks' war

In the Greek world, from the 5th century BC onwards, *polemos* was the most common term for war in general (what we would call the state of belligerence) and for wars in particular (all the military operations between two belligerents in a defined time sequence).

It has not always been this way. In the *Iliad*, *polemos* refers more to combat, armed struggle, and, by synecdoche, the confrontation between the Achaeans and the Trojans.[1] In the societies of the Greek Dark Age, military confrontations are a phenomenon that should be placed

on a gradient of conflictuality, without a clear cut between the private and public domains. The introduction to the *Works* of Hesiod thus places on the same level (that of the filiation of Eris, the goddess of discord) the competition between men, family quarrels, conflicts between social groups within the city and war between distinct communities (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 11–26).

Three centuries after the Homeric poems were composed, authors of the classical period used *polemos* in a more restrictive sense, inseparable from the notion of the State. For them, it was a confrontation between sovereign political communities. Plato thus considers that before city life, men were powerless against animals, "because they did not yet possess the art of politics (*technê politikê*), of which the art of war (*technê polemikê*) is a part" (Plato, *Protagoras*, 322b). This organic link between the two spheres is reflected, in Athens as in many other *poleis*, in the competence of the popular assembly (the *Ecclesia*) in matters of war and peace: the state of belligerency depends on a collective decision of the citizens (Garlan, 1972, p. 26).

This decision, because it is political, involves the civic body in its entirety. It is linked to the State's power of coercion over men, which brings us back to the monopoly of legitimate violence mentioned above: "Everyone shall regard the friend or enemy of the State as his own personal friend or enemy; and if anyone makes peace or war with any parties privately and without public consent, in his case also the penalty shall be death; and if any section of the State makes peace or war on its own account with any parties, the generals shall summon the authors of this action before the court, and the penalty for him who is convicted shall be death" (Plato, *Laws*, 12, 955b-c). This compelling force that pushes each citizen to "have the same enemy as the city" takes the form of conscription, a recruitment procedure well documented in the Athenian case (Christ, 2001). Attempting to evade it without a valid exemption reason exposes the deserter to *atimia*, that is to say, to the deprivation of civil rights, or even capital punishment.

Finally, since war involves the community as a whole, there cannot, in all logic, be a "civil war". When the city divides into factions, and this division degenerates into armed struggle, the Greeks avoid using the word *polemos* and prefer *stasis*. It is again Plato who offers the best insight on this point: "It seems to me that just as we have two terms: *polemos* and *stasis*, so there are two terms which correspond to differences between the two. I mean the words 'own' and 'family' on the one hand, and 'someone else's' and 'foreign' on the other. The word *stasis* is applied to one's personal enemy, and *polemos* to an outsider" (Plato, *Republic*, 5, 470b).[2]

1.2. The Romans' war

At the end of the Republican era (509–27 BC) and throughout the Imperial era (27 BC–476 AD), the Romans favored the Latin *bellum*, giving it a meaning comparable to that of the Greek *polemos* (Thomas, 2012). *Bellum* refers to war between organized political commu-

nities. The jurist Ulpian (3rd century AD) writes: "Enemies (*hostes*) are those against whom the Roman people has publicly declared war (*quibus bellum publice populus Romanus decreuit*) or those who have declared war on the Roman people in this way. The others are called brigands or looters." (*Digest*, 49, 15, 24). There is therefore no war in the strict sense without collective structures capable of declaring it publicly.[3] Nor is there any war without *iussum populi*, that is to say, without the vote by the *comitia centuriata* (one of the assemblies of the people, whose prerogatives the emperor would gradually absorb under the Principate) a *lex de bello indicendo*, the consequence of which was to put the Roman population in a state of belligerence against a designated enemy (Polybius, *Histories*, 6, 14, 10–11). War thus corresponds to a state of relations between two communities; it has its framework and its temporality, outside of which an armed confrontation is considered "robbery", *latrocinium* (Livy, *Roman History*, 2, 48, 5).

This view, which is very similar to that of the Greeks, was accompanied in Rome by a set of rituals governing the entry and exit of war, religious formalities intended to bring it into line with *ius*, law, of a divine nature. This was known as *bellum iustum* (Loreto, 2001; Turelli, 2011; Rampazzo, 2012). When these forms were not respected, the general in charge of operations ran the risk of losing the benefits he could hope to obtain from a legitimate victory. This is demonstrated by the accusations brought against Cnaeus Manlius Vulso in 187 BC. In order to deny him the honor of a triumph (the supreme reward of a political career, allowing the victorious general to parade through Rome accompanied by his army), a group of senators objected to the proconsul that, as part of his mission to Asia in 189–188 BC, he had overstepped his rights by carrying out a private plunder operation (*priuatum latrocinium*) against the Galatians (Livy, *Roman History*, 38, 45, 5–46, 13).

The Latin language, unlike ancient Greek, knows the "civil war", *bellum ciuile*. But this expression corresponds to a metaphorical use of the word war. The enemy, when he is a fellow citizen, cannot be described as a *hostis*, except to consider that he has separated himself from the social body and can be assimilated to a foreigner.[4] At most, he is an *inimicus* or an *aduersarius* (Cicero, *In defense of S. Roscius*, 126). As indicated above in the extract from Ulpian, other categories of adversaries are also excluded from the scope of *bellum iustum*: this is the case of "brigands" (*latrunculi*), "looters" (*praedones*) and "pirates" (*pirati*), who cannot be considered public enemies because, in the words of Cicero (*On Duties*, 3, 39, 107), they are "enemies of the human race" (*communes hostes omnium*). A particularly radical conception of the relationship between civilized states and "barbarian" peoples even goes so far as to relegate the latter to the rank of illegitimate adversaries by nature (Cicero, *Second Action Against Verres*, 4, 55, 122).

It goes without saying that these categories are fluid and that the Romans accord themselves the privilege of determining, according to the circumstances, what they consider to be banditry or war, a subject on which Augustine of Hippo comments ironically in *The City of God*: "And so if justice is left out, what are kingdoms except great robber bands? For what are robber bands except little kingdoms? The band also is a group of men governed by the orders of a leader, bound by a social compact, and its booty is divided according to a law agreed upon. If by repeatedly adding desperate men this plague grows to the point where it holds territory and establishes a fixed seat, seizes cities and subdues peoples, then it more conspicuously assumes the name of kingdom, and this name is now openly granted to it, not for any subtraction of cupidity, but by addition of impunity" (Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 4, 4).

1.3. War in its concrete manifestations

Normative discourses on war do not only pertain to the conditions of entering and exiting war. Ancient authors also develop considerations on what we would today call the *ius in bello*, that is to say the manner in which wars are conducted (Lynn, 2003, chap. 1). Greco-Roman sources convey an idealized vision of what war is (or rather, what it should be): a clash between organized and disciplined armies, mainly made up of citizen-soldiers, favoring fair combat, head-on confrontation, in the context of pitched battles where throwing weapons and methods based on surprise (strategies, ambushes, night fighting) play a limited role. This is what the American historian V. D. Hanson has very simplistically (and somewhat ethnocentrically) called the "Western way of war".[5]

These agonistic conventions—which are far from always respected in practice and are most often invoked when denigrating the successes of an opponent accused of "fighting badly"—are the product of a certain social organization, contemporaneous with the advent of the city. For example, it has been pointed out that the condemnation of the bow as a coward's weapon did not exist in Homer's time (see for example *Iliad*, 5, 171–173). This depreciation of ranged combat emerged precisely at a time when, as a result of the emergence of the city-state and the democratization of the profession of arms, rich aristocrats tended to distinguish themselves from the mass of combatants by possessing expensive metal defensive equipment associated with close combat and built a dominant conception of martial value around this new reality (Legrand-Sibeoni, 2021, pp. 765–769).

In the case of Rome, the formation of a vast Mediterranean empire contributed to accentuating this idealization of war. Once neighboring peoples had been defeated and integrated into the sphere of Roman domination, it was necessary to convince them of the merits of their submission, thus justifying the degradation of their status by insisting on the indisputable nature of their defeat. The Romans thus set themselves up as champions of a form of warfare in accordance with the *fides*, the sworn faith, prohibiting the use of unfair, "treacherous[6]" methods. Obviously, the generals of the Republic were careful not to apply these precepts to themselves during their wars of expansion: guerilla warfare were an integral part of the Romans' strategic arsenal (Cadiou, 2013; just as they

were at the heart of military practices in the Greek world: Saou, 2021). But this discourse, combined with a reinterpretation of history by the victors in the interest of the victors, made it possible to save face and retrospectively make Roman domination acceptable to yesterday's enemies (Holeindre, 2017, chap. 6).

1.4. From just war to holy war

In classical antiquity, wars were fought with the assistance of the gods, but they were not motivated by religious causes. It was not until later times that the notion of holy war came to the fore. The imperial form of political power, combining monarchical organization with the ideology of universal domination, may have encouraged the emergence of this form of conflict. This is a hypothesis that deserves to be examined, provided that we postulate, as A. Testart did, that the relationship between men and their god(s) is constructed by analogy with the power relationships that characterize human societies (Testart, 2006–2007). At the turn of the Christian era, Rome was no longer a city-state administered by a senatorial oligarchy, but a world empire governed by a *princeps*, whose monarchical power asserted itself more and more explicitly. From the 3rd century onwards, this development encouraged the identification of the prince with a tutelary, solar deity, a sovereign entity placed above the common gods, before becoming the one God when the Empire adopted Christianity as the state religion at the end of the 4th century (Carrié and Rousselle, 1999, pp. 110–111; for an early expression of this analogy in a Christian context, cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, 24, 3–4).

Alongside this shift, the theme of holy war bursts onto the literary scene. In the writings of Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo, the ancient *bellum iustum*, war conducted in accordance with the rites prescribed by immemorial tradition, underwent its monotheistic transformation: it became the morally just war, the war for Good, that is to say for the defense and (if God so willed) the propagation of Christianity. Against the enemies of religion, heretics, schismatics, infidels, assimilated to the demonic agents of Gog, homicidal violence is permitted and even encouraged.[7] This alliance of the sword and the cross is found in the words spoken by the Patriarch of Constantinople Nestorius on the occasion of his ordination in 428: "'Give me, my prince, the earth purged of heretics, and I will give you heaven as a recompense. Assist me in destroying heretics, and I will assist you in vanquishing the Persians" (Socrates of Constantinople, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7, 29, 5).

The allusion to the Persians is telling, because it was partly against this rival empire that Christian theology of victory was constructed. The idea of holy war is deeply rooted in Iran, where the Mazdean religion presents the earthly world as the theater of an eschatological struggle between Good and Evil, between the forces of Ohrmazd (Ahura-Mazdā in Avestan) and those of the Evil Spirit, Ahriman (Cereti, 2002). In the religious texts of the Sassanid period, the warriors of the *Ērānshahr* (the "kingdom of Iran") had the mission of eradicating the "non-Iranians" from their sacred lands.[8] In exchange for their sacrifice against the servants of Ahriman, Ohrmazd promises them the "Future Body", the eternal and blissful life that will follow the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment (*Denkard*, 8, 26, 14 and 22). The fact that, in late antiquity, the Sassanid dynasts also presented themselves as monarchs ruling over a universal empire could confirm the existence of a structural link between this form of power and the sanctification of armed conflicts.

Nonetheless, war retains its fundamentally state-based character. The legal compilations of late Antiquity take up the old definition of *bellum*, which can only be the emanation of the *res publica* (Huntzinger, 2009, pp. 54–57), and the Fathers of the Church are keen to keep armed violence under the monopoly of the public authorities: "The soldier can [...] without acting out of passion, comply with the law that orders him to repel force to defend his fellow citizens. The same must be said of all subordinates, obeying the constituted powers in whatever order and hierarchy" (Augustine, *Treatise on Free Will*, 1, 5, 12).[9] Furthermore, wars duly justified on religious grounds, such as Theodosius II's war against the Sassanid Empire in 421–422, remained the exception rather than the rule (on this war and its religious motivations, cf. Holum, 1977).

1.5. Non-war

In contrast to inter-state war, which is considered noble and legitimate, ancient authors tend to disqualify military actions involving communities that are not states, which are considered to be shameful activities, unworthy of civilized peoples. In a famous passage from the *Peloponnesian War* (1, 5, 1–3), Thucydides thus makes a clear distinction between war as practised by the Greek *poleis* of the 5th century BC and the brigandage (*lêsteia*) to which the Greeks of the "ancient times"—that is to say, the Dark Ages preceding the appearance of the city-state—resorted. He adds that many peoples of his time still practice this form of war of pillage, in Greece and beyond. The boundary between war and banditry depends not so much on the form taken by the operations themselves (the taking of booty is an unavoidable element of ancient wars) as on a criterion of social evolution: the peoples of *lêstai* are economically backward peoples, for whom looting is a means of subsistence in the same way as hunting, fishing or agriculture.[10]

This economic and military backwardness refers both to the past of civilized societies and to the present of certain societies with which the Greeks and Romans were confronted. Similar stereotypes are found in the philosophical texts dealing with the early days of humanity (which will be discussed below) and in the ethnographic descriptions of the barbarians, about whom the historian P. Cordier was able to speak of "prehistory in the present" (Cordier, 2006). Germanic warfare as depicted by Julius Caesar in his *Commentaries* are not fundamentally different from the archaic raids evoked by Thucydides. The

Roman proconsul takes care to link these predatory operations to the pre-political organization of the Germanic tribes, who have no lasting governmental authority and for whom military service is strictly voluntary, without the community having the power to compel each of its members to have "the same enemy as the city": "Acts of brigandage (*latrocinia*) committed outside the borders of each several state involve no disgrace; in fact, they affirm that such are committed in order to practise the young men and to diminish sloth. And when any of the chiefs has said in public assembly that he will be leader (*dux*), "Let those who will follow declare it," then all who approve the cause and the man rise together to his service and promise their own assistance, and win the general praise of the people. Any of them who have not followed, after promise, are reckoned as deserters and traitors, and in all things afterwards trust (*fides*) is denied to them" (Caesar, *The Gallic War*, VI, 23, 6–8).

In this perspective, the further a people is distant from the political condition, the more likely it is to be oblivious to the subtleties of war. Tacitus takes up this pattern in his famous treatise on *Germania*, written at the end of the 1st century AD. He distinguishes different degrees of social evolution, ranging from socially structured peoples, practicing a form of warfare close to that of the Romans (such as the Chatti[11]), to the most savage tribes, which are characterized by the extreme barbarity of their customs, and go so far as to ignore the phenomenon of warfare. Thus among the Fennes, ancestors of the Finns: "Astonishing barbarism and disgusting misery: no arms, no horses, no household; wild plants for their food, skins for their clothing, the ground for their beds" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 46, 3).

Let us summarize. Throughout their history, the Greek and Romans developed a concept of war that was closely linked to the forms of social organization, economic exploitation and political domination that prevailed in their own societies. This concept is based on the idea that armed conflicts are part of the natural order of things; that they must be placed under the control of the sovereign bodies of organized states; that they are therefore the hallmark of civilized peoples and must be distinguished from the depredations of barbarians and brigands; that as such, they are not based on the use of brute force, but on a set of rules designed to limit the use of violence. It was not until the end of Antiquity that new normative discourses emerged, particularly under the influence of Christianity and the political rivalry between Rome and Iran. But they did not fundamentally challenge the classical definition of war as an armed interstate conflict.

2. THE WAR OF THE MYTHS

In the Greco-Roman world as elsewhere, one of the functions of myths is to explain and legitimize the existing social order (Godelier, 2015, chap. 8). With regard to the representation of armed conflicts, ancient authors tend to contrast two symbolic systems: on the one hand, the cosmic, Olympian order, based on law and just war, of which the city-state and its military institutions are the earthly avatar; on the other hand, the world of chthonic and wild forces, associated in legends with the unbridled and sacrilegious violence that characterizes the enemies of the gods and pre-political communities.

2.1. War in ancient sociogenesis narratives

The elements of definition of which we have drawn up an inventory are firstly reflected in the myths relating to the early days of societies. These sociogenesis narratives depict the evolution of human societies from a primordial state, an age of abundance and prosperity during which Man knew no war. Two traditions can be distinguished (see table 1).

The first derives from Hesiod's poetry (circa 700 BC) and identifies, since the creation of the world, several successive races: the golden race, the silver race, the bronze race, the race of heroes and the iron race, which corresponds to present-day humanity (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 109–201). For the Greek poet, war is specific to the last three races, but it only manifests itself when men stray from divine justice (*dikè*) and show excess (*hubris*; Vernant, 1960; see in particular Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 229–230 and 240–248). The Roman poet Ovid took up this theme in the 1st century BC, incorporating elements of philosophical reflection that set him apart from Hesiod's strictly providentialist vision. According to him, the golden race was ignorant of agriculture, wealth and private property: "Not yet were cities begirt with steep moats; there were no trumpets of straight, no horns of curving brass, no swords or helmets. There was no need at all of armed men, for nations, secure from war's alarms, passed the years in gentle ease. The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful" (Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 1, 97–102). It was only with the Bronze Age that men became *saeuior ingeniis et promptior arma*, "more savage in spirit and quicker to take up arms" (Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 1, 126). From the Iron Age, under the reign of Zeus/Jupiter, came private ownership of land and wars proper, motivated by *amor habendi*, the "desire to possess": "And the ground, which had hitherto been a common possession like the sunlight and the air, the careful surveyor now marked out with long-drawn boundary-line. […] And now baneful iron had come, and gold more baneful than iron; war came, which fights with both, and brandished in its bloody hands the clashing arms" (Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, 1, 135–143).

The second tradition, of philosophical inspiration, is found mainly in Plato (*The Republic*, 271 a–272 b), Lucretius (*On Nature*, 5, 925–1457) and Seneca (*Letters to Lucilius*, 90). This tradition is structured around a binary scheme, opposing the golden age to the iron age. It takes into account the mode of subsistence and appropriation of resources, but also integrates the criterion of the level of social organization into the explanatory scheme of the evolution of human societies. The golden

Hesiodic tradition (Hesiod, Ovid)					
	Golden race	**Silver race**	**Bronze race**	**Heroic race**	**Iron race**
Mode of subsistence and resource appropriation	Age of abundance (eternal spring): gathering / foraging No agriculture No private property	Appearance of seasons → scarcity of resources Early development of agriculture	Collective ownership of land Agriculture	Not specified	Private ownership of land Agriculture
State of human relations	Age of peace: absence of conflict	Not specified (implicitly: age of peace)	War (*hubris*) Armed violence	War (*dikè*)	War (consequence of the violation of divine justice) (motivated by *amor habendi*)

Philosophical tradition (Plato, Lucretius, Seneca [Poseidonius])			
	Primitive age / Golden Age (reign of Cronos / Saturn)	**Transition**	**Present age (reign of Zeus / Jupiter)**
Mode of subsistence and resource appropriation	Age of abundance: gathering / foraging No agriculture Community of resources	Private property	Agriculture Private ownership of land
Social organization	Absence of *politeia*: rule of the wise Egalitarian society	Kingship (or tyranny) Inegalitarian society	*Politeia*: law, statutes, magistrates
State of human relations	Age of peace	Violence (*vis*), plunder (*rapina*) between *inimici* Cause: *pleonexia* / *avaritia* / *luxuria*	War (*bellum*) between *hostes*

Table 1 – The Ages of Humanity and the Emergence of War.

age is characterized, in the same way as in the Hesiodic tradition, by an abundance of resources, the absence of wars and an economy based on the direct collection of the goods necessary for life. The men live without *politeia*, without political organization. At best, they rely on the wise (*sapientes*). It is only with the appearance of wealth, and its concomitant appropriation by a power qualified as either "royalty" or "tyranny," that human relations deteriorate. Society becomes unequal, and discord arises in among men, driven by the desire to possess (*pleonexia*, *auaritia*). The first instances of collective violence emerge. This is neither *polemos* nor *bellum*, but acts of plunder (*rapina*), setting *inimici* against one another. To restore harmony between men, societies adopt a political organization (*politeia*): magistrates, laws, a legal system. We are now in the Iron Age. Violence does not disappear: it takes the form of war, a kind of inevitability inseparable from city-life.

As can be seen, in both traditions, the subtext is more or less the same. What these stories have in common is that they make war the synthesis of two elements: private property, a cause of discord between men, and the State, a means found by these same men to re-establish a certain social equilibrium. In stateless societies, collective confrontations are savage and disorderly in nature, and are driven by private interests. They do not deserve to be called war and are not referred to as such.

2.2. Wars of the gods, wars of men

This binary scheme finds an extension in the myths that relate to the wars of the Olympian gods, led by Zeus, against the offspring of Ouranos and Gaia, the Titans and the Giants. The fight against these evil creatures led to the establishment of a reign based on justice (*dikè*), in the image of the earthly order governed by city life (Vian, 1952). Let us begin by quoting Diodorus Siculus, who wrote in the first century BC, but drew inspiration from a much earlier tradition: "When [Zeus] took over the kingly power from Cronus, he conferred benefactions of the greatest number and importance upon the life of mankind. He was the first of all, for instance, to lay down rules regarding acts of injustice and to teach men to deal justly one with another, to refrain from deeds of violence, and to settle their differences by appeals to men and to courts of justice. In short, he contributed in abundance to the practices which are concerned with obedience to law and with peace, prevailing upon good men by persuasion and intimidating evil men by threat of punishment and by their fear. He also visited practically the entire inha-

bited earth, putting to death robbers and impious men and introducing equality and democracy. [During the same expedition] the Giants were punished by Zeus because they had treated the rest of mankind in a lawless fashion and, confiding in their bodily superiority and strength, had enslaved their neighbours, and because they were also disobeying the rules of justice" (Diodorus Siculus, *The Library of History*, 5, 71, 1–5).

Very similar considerations can be found in the *Compendium of Greek Theology* by the Stoic philosopher L. Annaeus Cornutus (1st century AD), who emphasizes the role played by Athena Polias ("Protectress of the City") in the process of exterminating the Giants and civilizing humanity: "She is described as 'martial': she is indeed skilled in the art of command, she leads wars (*polemoi*) and she fights to defend justice (*dikaios*) [...]. It is also said that, in the war against the Giants, Athena performed wonders and for this reason she is called the 'Slayer of Giants' (*Gigantophontis*). The fact is that the first men, born of the earth, were violent and angry (*baioi kai thumikoi*) towards each other because they could neither distinguish nor fan the spark of sociability (*koinônia*) that lay within them. The gods, by striking them as if to awaken them and by making them recall shared notions, overcame them. It was above all the skill of reason (*logos*) that defeated and subdued them to the point of seeming to have driven them out and eliminated them as much as they were. They did indeed become different from this change, as did their descendants, who were united in cities (*sumpolisthentes*) by Athena Polias" (Cornutus, *Abrégé de théologie grecque*, 20)

In the symbolic system of these two authors, the Giants embody the disruption of primitive times. They are like barbarians alien to the urban way of life: violent, greedy, sacrilegious and full of excess (*hubris*). By waging war on them, the Olympians bring humanity into the age of *nomos* (the "conventions" that govern life in society). Through legitimate warfare, they repel the forces of Chaos to the margins of the inhabited and civilized world. It will therefore come as no surprise to learn that in the iconographic repertoire of Greco-Roman art, Titanomachy and Gigantomachy are used to evoke victories won against the barbarians. The best-known example of this political art is the Gigantomachy on the Great Altar of Pergamon, commissioned by King Eumenes II to celebrate his military successes against the Galatians in 166 BC.[12]

2.3. Holy war and divine providence

In late antiquity, the conceptualization of holy war produced symbolic associations of a significantly different nature. The great religious narratives that, in both Rome and Iran, convey a general message about the nature of war do not merely endorse the central role of the state in the exercise of legitimate violence. Rather, they elaborate the notion of an ideological necessity for war, inscribed in a providential and eschatological framework: war is construed as a necessary evil, ultimately intended to lead to the establishment of a perfect divine order. It is no longer a normal state of social life, but a means to an end—*the very* war to end *all the* wars.

The Church Fathers drew on the Old Testament and apocalyptic literature to establish this concept. In his treatise *On Faith* addressed to the emperor Gratian in 378, Ambrose of Milan thus compares the Goths who invaded the Roman Empire to the army of Gog, mentioned in *Ezekiel*, 38–39, that is to say, the forces of Evil that will rise up against Israel at the end of time (Ambrose of Milan, *On Faith*, 2, 16, 137). To fight against the Goth is to fight against Gog: *Gog iste Gothus est*, writes the bishop. And to call on the emperor Gratian, as "leader of the heavenly militia", to seize the standard of Christ to crush the enemies of the true faith.

Similar accents characterize Zoroastrian religious texts in the Sassanid world. In the great cosmogonic narrative called *Bundahishn* (literally "The First Creation"), the creation of the material world, the world of men, is presented as an instrument of the primordial struggle between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. The former gives birth to men so that they can, in his name, wage the armed struggle that will definitively defeat the forces of Evil: "It was at noon that Ohrmazd and the Amahraspands [= the auxiliary deities of the beneficent god] forged the spirit of worship. During the celebration of the worship, he created all creation. He consulted with men's perceptions and frawahrs [= the souls that pre-exist material creation], instilling in them all- knowing wisdom. He said: 'What seems more profitable to you: That I fashion you in the material world, fighting bodily against the demons and destroying them, so that in the end I will restore you, whole and immortal, and I will return you to the material world undying, ageless, and unopposed for ever? Or, that you always require protection from the Adversary?' With their all-knowing wisdom, the frawahrs of men saw the evil that would befall them in the material world from the demons and Ahriman. But because in the end the Adversary would be vanquished and they would be—come whole again and immortal forever in the Final Body, they agreed to go to the material world" (*Bundahishn* 3, 26–27).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope to have demonstrated that "war", as defined by classical authors, is only identified with a certain type of armed conflict: the confrontations between political communities, and presupposing the existence of norms, prescriptions and prohibitions that define the relationship between men and the divine as much as they contribute to limiting the intensity of the fighting. In this respect, *polemos* and *bellum* can appear as ideological constructions rooted in a certain type of social organization.[13] This organic relationship between the military and the political evolved during the first centuries of our era, as Rome transformed itself into a world empire and

produced new discourses adapted to its claimed status as a universal power. The idea developed that war must be morally just and can only tend towards the establishment of a lasting, if not perpetual, peace. Such orientations are foreign to wealthless and stateless societies. They postulate the existence of institutional mechanisms and military objectives that are lacking in primitive and prehistoric communities.

On the other hand, the classic definition of war has adapted well to the world of modern European states and, for this reason, has strongly influenced Western military theory, donning the garb of universality in the process. Need we be reminded that the law of nations (the set of legal provisions that govern the relations between states), theorized from the 16th century onwards by jurists such as A. Gentili and H. Grotius, is largely based on Roman law and is an extension of the philosophical discussions discussed in this article[14]? Accustomed to handling this concept, Western scholars have tended to apply it indiscriminately to societies of the past. This ethnocentric bias is the cause of many misunderstandings, but also of endless debates on the meaning of the word "war". It is not surprising that these discussions often focus on the nature of the actors—human groups, organized social groups, political units or states, etc.—to the detriment of other aspects: this question is central because there is a continuum between contemporary uses of the word and the Greco-Roman polemological tradition.

NOTES

1   See M. N. Nagler (1988) and du Bouchet (2012). The latter notes that *polemos* is "similar to *pelemizô* 'to agitate, shake, unsettle', [which] probably began by referring either to the gesture of brandishing a weapon or, more likely, to the turmoil of a melee" (du Bouchet, 2012, p. 64).

2   The bibliography devoted to the concept of *stasis* is very extensive. For a historical and philosophical approach, the works of N. Grangé are worth consulting (see in particular Grangé, 2015).

3   In the same vein, see Cicero: "Your ancestors, Men of Rome, had to deal with the kind of enemy (*hostis*) who possessed a state, a senate, a public treasury, a consensus of like-minded citizens, and a consideration for a treaty of peace, if events had developed that way: this enemy of yours [author's note: this is the Roman general Marc Antony] is attacking your state, but he himself has none. […] Men of Rome, the whole conflict lies between the Roman people, the conqueror of all nations, and an assassin, a bandit, a Spartacus" (Cicero, *Philippics* 4, 6, 14-15).

4   This is the essence of the procedure whereby the Senate declares a citizen *hostis publicus* (see Zucchetti, 2022).

5   See V. D. Hanson (1989 and 2001); see also T. Vijgen (2020), which offers a more nuanced and up-to-date

inventory of this type of discourse for the whole of Greco-Roman antiquity.

6   See G. Brizzi (1999). See in particular Livy (172 BC): "Not by ambushes and battles by night," they thought, "nor by pretended flight and unexpected return to an enemy off his guard, nor in such a way as to boast of cunning rather than real bravery, did our ancestors wage war […]. With the same straight-forwardness (*fides*) the information was given to King Pyrrhus that his physician was plotting against his life; in the same way the betrayer of their children was delivered bound to the Faliscans; these are the acts of Roman scrupulousness, not of Carthaginian artfulness nor of Greek slyness, since among these peoples it has been more praiseworthy to deceive an enemy than to conquer by force" (Livy, *History of Rome*, 42, 47, 5–8).

7   See R. H. Bainton (1960, pp. 85–95), L. J. Swift (1970) and D. A. Lenihan (1988). See in particular Ambrose, *On Faith* (2, 16, 136–143). The assimilation of barbarians and enemies of the Church, which is at the foundation of Ambrosian doctrine of just war, makes virtually any war undertaken by Christian power against infidels acceptable (Ambrose, *On Tobias*, 15, 51). Augustine is more nuanced on this point, especially in *The city of God*, where he develops a critique of war and violence committed against the innocent. But he seems to consider, on the basis of Old Testament examples, that war waged by order of God (*Deo auctore*) is essentially a just war (see Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, 6, 10).

8   The impurity inherent in the act of homicide is erased by the assimilation of enemies to harmful predators, which religion commands to eradicate. *Dēnkard*, 8, 26, 1: non-Iranians are "two-legged wolves". *Dēnkard* 8 26, 22: non-Iranians are *margarzān* (they deserve death). A limit is set on this exercise of violence in *Dēnkard*, 8, 26, 21: before the battle, there is a need to talk to the enemy leader about the religion of the gods, probably to encourage him to submit to the true Zoroastrian faith. See S. Azarnouche and M. Petitjean (2022).

9   See also Augustine, *Contra Faustum* (22, 22 and 74–75) and *The city of God* (1, 21 and 26). Augustine seems to set a limit to this obedience: the case where a soldier would be led to act against the manifest will of God (Swift, 1973). But he admits that blind obedience shall be the rule when doubt prevails.

10   See Herodotus, *The Histories* (5, 6) and Aristotle, *The Politics* (1256 a, 35–36) and with Legrand-Sibeoni, 2021, pp. 319–320.

11   Tacitus: "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 recognise opportunities; reserve their 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 (*proelium*), but the Chatti go to war (*bellum*)" (Tacitus, *Germania*, 30, 2–3).

12   See F. Queyrel, 2017. These same Galatians are referred to as the "Newborn Titans" by Callimachus (*Hymn to Delos*, 174). For an analysis of the Greek myths associated with uncontrolled conflicts, it is also useful to consult the work of P. Ellinger (1993) on the war of annihilation in the national legend of the Phocaeans.

13 I draw inspiration here from a hypothesis put forward by
    M. Godelier (1978): the city-state is the dominant authority
    in the Greco-Roman world because it supervises access to
    the means of production and thus occupies a preponderant
    place in all fields of social life, including that of armed vio-
    lence between communities.

14 See J.-M. Mattéi (2006, pp. 19–20). As a proper heir to
    this tradition, C. Schmitt states: "War is an armed strug-
    gle between organized political units; civil war is an armed
    struggle within a political unit (thus calling this into ques-
    tion)" (C. Schmitt, 1992 [1932], p. 70).

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DISCUSSION

Maurice Fhima: At the beginning of your presentation, you spoke of the *bellum justus*, or "just war", saying that in this "just war", there is no plundering—or rather, war is not waged for the sake of plundering. However, there is still an ambiguity because if I remember correctly, Julius Caesar funded the Gallic Wars with his personal fortune, but he returned with much more significant possessions. So, certainly, he did not wage war for plunder, but then again, without plundering, it wouldn't have worked! So was it *justus* or not?

Maxime Petitjean: I may not have been precise or clear enough on this point, but that is what I meant: it is completely normal to enrich oneself by waging a "just" war. This could be called a by-product of the Roman wars. There is absolutely no contradiction here. The distinction lies more in the idea that wars of plunder, which tend to be considered illegitimate, are those waged by communities that need this activity, for whom it is a means of subsistence. The looting carried out by the Greeks and Romans is a secondary outcome, not the primary aim. Wars are not waged solely to obtain means of subsistence. This idea is found in Herodotus' Histories, in a passage about the Thracians' way of life.