

Battlefield Epiphanies in Ancient Greece: A Survey*

I

Reports of battlefield epiphanies - by which I mean appearances of gods and heroes on the battlefield during combat - recur in ancient accounts of Greek military campaigns. Based on the data collected in Chapter II of the third volume of W.K.Pritchett's study of *The Greek State at War* (Berkeley 1979), a list may be compiled of up to 22 such episodes.¹

1. Tanagra, unknown date. Hermes Promakhos led Tanagran epebes into battle. Hermes was an important local deity.² Source: Paus. 9.22.2.

2. River Sagra, c.560BC. Following a promise made by the Spartans and after receiving favourable sacrificial omens, the Dioscuri fought alongside the Lokrians against Kroton, wearing scarlet cloaks and mounted on white horses. The Lokrians had also furnished a couch on their ship for the heroes. Source: Justin 20.2f (epitomising Pompeius Trogus, whose own sources are uncertain). In an earlier account in Diodorus, however, no actual epiphany is reported (8.32.1f). The triumphal associations of the white horses, moreover, arouse some suspicion, and the technical term which Justin uses to describe the colour of the heroes' cloaks (*coccineis*) suggests that his description is based on his (or rather Pompeius', or Pompeius' source's) recollection of the scarlet cloaks worn by contemporary Roman generals.³

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¹Though Pritchett's chapter deals with the broader category of 'military epiphanies', and most of the reports which he cites seem not to be directly relevant to our inquiry.

²Vide Fiehn, *RE* 4.2, 2159.

³Cf. Pliny *N.H.* 22.3. Spartan soldiers did admittedly wear short cloaks of a colour which our sources call φοίνιξ (vide P.A.Cartledge, 'Hoplites and Heroes', *JHS* 97 (1977), 15), but the term *coccinus* denoted a particular shade of bright scarlet manufactured from the kermes or scale insect which was quite distinct from the Spartans' murex-based hues (cf. J.L.Sebesta, 'Tunica Ralla, Tunica Spissa: The Colors and Textiles of Roman Costume' in J.L.Sebesta and L.Bonfante, *The World of Roman Costume*, 71).

3. [Ditto.] Because of their relationship with the Opuntians, the Lokrians called upon Ajax son of Oileus before the battle, and left a space for him in their battle-formation. He appeared and gravely wounded an enemy soldier, who was afterwards sent by the Delphic oracle to Leuke, where Ajax appeared to him together with Achilles and several other legendary heroes and healed him. Sources: Konon 26*FgH*1.18; Paus. 3.19.12f (citing Krotonian and Himerian traditions). Only Konon, however, actually says the soldier was wounded by Ajax: Pausanias says merely that he was wounded after heading for the place in the battle-line where Ajax was supposed to be.

4. Marathon, 490BC. A large hoplite was seen by a warrior called Epizelos and killed the man beside him. Epizelos lost his sight as a result of the experience. Source: Hdt. 6.117 (on whom all other sources are dependent), based on a tradition allegedly deriving from Epizelos' own testimony.

5. [Ditto.] Theseus was seen attacking the Persians. Source: Plut. *Thes.* 35.8. Paus. 1.15.3 confirms that Theseus appeared in a picture of the battle which adorned the Stoa Poikile, built c.470-460BC.⁴ 'Ekhetl(ai)os' was depicted too (see below, 6) - but so were Athene, Heracles and the hero Marathon, and no-one seems to have claimed that *they* appeared in person. It is not unlikely that Plutarch - or, more probably, his source - has made an incorrect deduction from the Stoa picture.

6. [Ditto.] A man in σκευήν ἄγροικον was seen killing the Persian troops with a plough. An oracle later identified him as 'Ekhetlos' or 'Ekhetlaios' (= 'plough-handle'?). Source: Paus. 1.32.5 (cf. again 15.3 on the Stoa painting).

7. Delphi, 480BC. Two large figures, believed by the Delphians to be the local heroes Phylakos and Autonoös, whose precincts lay nearby, were seen harrying the Persians. Source: Hdt. 8.38f, affirming that the epiphany was originally reported by Persian survivors.

8. Salamis, 480BC. Some Athenian sailors reported seeing visions of armed men coming from Aigina and stretching their hands out in front of the Greek triremes; these were believed to be the Aiakidai, whom

⁴Date: T.L.Shear, 'The Athenian Agora: Excavations of 1980-1982', *Hesperia* 53 (1984), 13f.

the Athenians had previously called upon for assistance. Source: Plut. *Themist.* 15.1. Though he does not mention the incident, Herodotus does confirm that the Athenians had invoked the Aiakids before the battle (along with Aias, Telamon and 'all the gods': 8.64).

9. [Ditto.] The Athenian forces saw a woman shouting commands and reproaches at the Greek forces. Source: Hdt. 8.84.

10. [Ditto.] A serpent was seen with the Athenian fleet. This was later identified by an oracle as a manifestation of the hero Kykhreus, a sanctuary of whom lay nearby. Source: Paus. 1.36.1.

11. Koroneia, 447BC. An official inscription may report an epiphany of an unnamed god. Source: W.Peek, *Griechische Vers-Inschriften* vol. 1 (Berlin, 1955), no. 17.

12. Aigospotamoi, 405BC. The Dioscuri appeared in the form of stars which were seen by the rudders on either side of Lysander's ship. Source: Plut. *Lys.* 12.1.

13. Leuktra, 371BC. The Messenians report that their national hero Aristomenes intervened in the battle against the Spartans. Source: Paus. 4.32.4. It is unclear, however, whether it was believed that the hero in question actually *appeared* on the battlefield - and, in any case, the notice probably tells us more about Messenian nationalistic sentiment than anything else.

14. Delphi, 279BC. It seems to have been believed that Apollo appeared and intervened in the battle against the Gauls. Source: *Syll.*³ 398. Callimachus' *Hymn to Delos* avoids mentioning explicitly a specific personal appearance by the god.

15. [Ditto.] A number of heroes appeared to help the Greeks. There appears to have been some uncertainty about their identities, but they may have included Hyperokhos, Laodokos, Amadokos, Pyrrhos and the local hero Phylakos (cf. 7). Source: Paus. 1.4.4, 10.23.3.

16. [Ditto.] Following an oracle promising the support of Apollo and the 'white maidens', Athene, Artemis and perhaps Apollo were seen intervening in the battle. Sources: Cic. *Div.* 1.81; Justin 24.8.4-6; Suda

s.v. 'ἐμοί μελήσει'. Perhaps suspiciously, Diodorus makes no mention of the epiphany (22.9.5).

17. Argos, 272BC. The woman who threw the tile that killed Pyrrhus was said by the Argives to have been Demeter in human form. Source: Paus. 1.13.8.

18. Mantinea, mid-Third Century BC. Poseidon appeared and helped the Mantineians against the Spartans. Source: Paus. 8.10.8.

19. Knidos, ?201BC. Artemis Hyakinthotrophos appeared in an unidentified battle, perhaps connected with Philip's siege of 201. Source and doxography: Pritchett, 36 (the inscription which he mentions has since been published: cf. *SEG* 38.812).

20. Pergamon, ?144BC. Zeus Tropaios may have appeared during Attalos II's campaign against the Thracian king Diegylis. Source and doxography: Pritchett, 36f.

21. Bargylia, Second Century BC. An unidentified deity appeared in an unidentified battle. Source and doxography: Pritchett, 37.

22. Lagina, ?early First Century BC. Hekate may have appeared in a time of crisis. Source and doxography: Pritchett, 38.

23. Stratonikeia, ?40BC. Zeus and Hekate may have appeared on the battlefield, perhaps during Labenius' invasion. Source and doxography: Pritchett, 39.

It will be appreciated that some of these may not be authentic cases of battlefield epiphanies according to our earlier definition. Together, however, they constitute a reasonably impressive yield.

The phenomenon of the battlefield epiphany, we should note, is not confined to ancient Greece. As the Roman historian Tim Cornell has noted, '[r]eported sightings of divine beings at great battles - gods, angels, the Virgin Mary, etc. - are copiously documented, from remote antiquity to the First World War and beyond'. Cornell made this observation in the course of a discussion of the tradition that Castor and Pollux had assisted the Roman forces at the battle of Lake Regillus in the early Fifth Century BC and had

afterwards been seen in the Forum.⁵ His reference to the Virgin Mary was perhaps prompted by Pritchett's report of an epiphany which allegedly occurred during the conquest of Mexico;⁶ and, as to the First World War, a number of different supernatural visitants, including Jesus and the 'Angels of Mons', are said to have appeared to troops at various times.⁷

II

Broadly speaking, there are four ways of explaining battlefield epiphanies. Firstly, they might really have happened. Secondly, they might be more or less conscious fictions. Thirdly, they might have psychopathic roots. Fourthly, they might be based upon simple misidentifications.

I do not intend to give further consideration to the first possibility. It is, however, worth noting that a cultural acceptance on the *Greeks'* part of the possibility of epiphanies may have made them more ready to accept accounts of epiphanies in battle. Certainly, our sources report divine epiphanies in contexts other than battle scenes - though the special circumstances of battle were, as I shall argue, particularly conducive to the generation of epiphany stories.

As to the second possibility, it seems not unlikely *prima facie* that many reports of battlefield epiphanies are fictions employed by historians as literary conceits, either because they provided a simple and effective means of lending a narrative an heroic, Homeric colouring or because in due course the epiphany report became a standardised, self-reproducing topos. This sort of explanation may well account for 2 and 3, which have several suspicious features, but scarcely for many, if any, of the remainder of the reports. Firstly, the figures who are reported as appearing are not usually major gods or 'A-list' celebrities like Hector and Achilles, though they may have some local

⁵*The Beginnings of Rome*, London 1995, 293f.

⁶40. In fact, Pritchett was not the first to compare this episode to the ancient Greek epiphany-reports: *vide* J.G.Frazer, *Pausanias's Description of Greece*, vol. 5, London 1898, *ad* 10.23.2.

⁷It is sometimes claimed that the Angels of Mons story had its origins in a piece of patriotic fiction called 'The Bowmen', which was published by one Arthur Machen in the *Evening News* in September 1914. In fact, weeks before Machen's story appeared, a British Brigadier-General had reported that many soldiers of the 2nd Corps were eagerly telling each other 'how the angel of the Lord... faced the advancing Germans at Mons and forbade them further progress' (cited in J.Terraine, *The Smoke and the Fire*, London 1980, 18).

importance (1,7,8,10,13,15): sometimes, indeed, they are anonymous (4,9,11), or otherwise unknown (6,15; in the latter case, there is also confusion over the heroes' identity⁸). It must also be remembered that a considerable number of epiphany reports survive only in inscribed public documents (11,14,19-23), where they cannot easily be explained away as literary conceits: several, indeed, cite the epiphanies concerned as the occasion for formal ritual thanksgivings *et cetera*.

Explanation two can be framed slightly differently. We might look upon stories of battlefield epiphanies as fictions concocted by soldiers eager to impress their comrades or commanders seeking to buoy up their troops' morale - or, for that matter, by a jubilant and grateful community suffused with triumphalistic and patriotic sentiment after a major victory. This would certainly account for the appearances of 'minor', non-Homeric heroes who had some standing and importance in the local community. A taste for the exotic and self-glorificatory certainly serves well to account for the preservation and spread of tales of epiphanies; it might even, in some cases, explain their fabrication *ex nihilo* (13 and 17 in particular may be cited here). It is by no means able to provide a credible explanation in every case, however: we may refer again to epiphanies involving unknown or obscure heroes, as well as to those involving beings who show hostility towards the soldiers to whom they appear (4,7⁹,11).

The third explanation seems the most promising. In my opinion, most ancient and modern battlefield epiphanies are the products of pathological mental states induced by the unusual physical and psychological conditions which precede and accompany combat.¹⁰

In psychological terms, war is first and foremost an exceptionally *stressful* experience. Though obviously no ancient data on this point are available,¹¹ modern research suggests that levels of combat stress reactions (CSRs) among troops can reach very substantial levels. Investigators have reported that the total percentage of CSRs with psychiatric appearance (which

⁸M.H.Jameson conjectured that Ekhetl(ai)os, the hero of 6, had in fact existed prior to the battle of Marathon and had developed from agricultural ritual involving the plough ('The Hero Ekhetlaeus', *TAPhA* 82 (1951), 49-61). This suggestion admittedly has some plausibility, though it seems rather speculative.

⁹Assuming that this epiphany really was reported by the Persian soldiers concerned.

¹⁰This explanation matches that offered by V.D.Hanson in *The Western Way of War*, London 1989, 192f.

¹¹Though Hanson's work (n.9) highlights well just how severe the psychological effects of hoplite warfare in particular were likely to be.

together constitute just part of the total) in combat divisions in World War II was 28.5%, rising to 33% in forward infantry battalions. Another index of the prevalence of CSRs is the proportion of the total wounded for which they account: figures of between 10% and 48% are reported for American soldiers wounded in single battles in World War II and of up to 70% for some Israeli units in the Yom Kippur War. It should further be borne in mind that some researchers have undoubtedly underestimated the prevalence of CSRs by using inappropriately narrow definitions; this applies notably to statistics associated with the Vietnam War.¹²

The human mind and body react to stress in a variety of different ways. Stress can produce increased heartbeat, laboured breathing, loss of motivation, decreased vigilance, performance rigidity, lowered immunity to disease and many other physical and mental effects.¹³ More importantly for our purposes, however, stress can under certain sets of circumstances induce hallucinations in otherwise healthy and rational individuals. As Bentall and Slade note in their study of hallucination, the necessary circumstances can be unusual and extreme (a hostage situation, for example), but they can also be something as inevitable and universal as bereavement. Significantly for our inquiry, patients sometimes hallucinate possible natural or supernatural means of escape from the predicament which is stressing them: a group of miners trapped underground, for example, reported seeing visions of doorways, stairs and the Pope. Bentall and Slade actually cite one example of soldiers on manoeuvres experiencing stress-induced hallucinations, though in this case the subjects had also been deprived of sleep.¹⁴

This leads us on to the important point that fatigue is another very real producer of hallucinations: indeed, some very convincing examples of sleep deprivation causing people to see things may be cited from specifically

¹²Vide generally S.Noy, 'Combat Stress Reactions', *Handbook of Military Psychology*, R.Gal and A.D.Mangelsdorff edd., Chichester 1991, 508f, noting also that (for example) '[i]f evacuations for illness were included among the CSR casualties in the Pacific Theater of Operation, World War II, the number of CSR casualties would surpass by far the number of wounded in action'.

¹³J.E.Driskell and E.Salas, 'Overcoming the Effects of Stress on Military Performance: Human Factors, Training, and Selection Strategies', *Handbook of Military Psychology*, R.Gal and A.D.Mangelsdorff edd., Chichester 1991, 185, with bibliography.

¹⁴Vide generally R.P.Bentall and P.D.Slade, *Sensory Deception*, London 1988, 86, 88 (cf. 84-92 on the link between stress and hallucination generally).

military contexts.¹⁵ *À propos* of the Mons legend, for example, one private soldier wrote of the retreat from Le Cateau (26th August 1914):

If any angels were seen on the Retirement, as the newspaper accounts said they were, they were seen that night. March, march, for hour after hour, without no halt; we were now breaking into the fifth day of continuous marching with practically no sleep in between. We were carrying our rifles all shapes and it was only by luck that many a man didn't receive a severe bayonet wound during the night. Stevens said, "There's a fine castle, see?" pointing to one side of the road. But there was nothing there. Very nearly everyone were seeing things, we were all so dead beat.¹⁶

The great German psychiatrist Robert Wollenberg wrote of similar episodes:

Bei erhaltenem Bewußtsein sind Pseudohalluzinationen verhältnismäßig häufig als Erschöpfungssymptom bei Kriegsteilnehmern beobachtet worden. So berichtet Wollenberg von einem Arzt, der nach sehr ermüdenen Märschen die Vision weißer Häuserreihen am Straßenrande hatte, und von einem Offizier, der Kavallerie und eine Luftschiffe in eigentümlich fließender Bewegung sah.¹⁷

Admittedly, as far as the ancient Greek epiphanies are concerned, there is usually no particular reason to believe that the soldiers fighting the battles at which epiphanies are said to have taken place were in a state of extreme exhaustion. In some cases, however, such as that of Salamis, there *are* indications that the troops concerned had not been resting properly - and there must have been more than a few hoplites in every battle upon whom the general exertions of military life and duties, combined with insomnia or a simple failure to get a few good nights' sleep, had taken their toll.

¹⁵We must distinguish this sort of hallucination from 'hypnagogic' and 'hypnopomic' hallucinations, which may occur in otherwise healthy people upon falling asleep and waking respectively. It is extremely difficult to imagine how *these* phenomena could occur on the battlefield.

¹⁶F.Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, London 1933, 19.

¹⁷O.Bumke, *Lehrbuch der Geisteskrankheiten*⁷, Munich 1948, 26. No reference is provided.

Delirium (or, more correctly, acute cognitive impairment syndrome) may be another source of battlefield hallucinations: indeed, authorities on the subject of visual hallucinations note that they “are most frequently found in organic psychoses, particularly deliria.”¹⁸ Distortions of perception also happen to be the most common symptom of delirium:

[V]isual perception is the modality most often affected. Illusions and misperceptions are frequent. For example, a patient may become agitated and fearful, believing that a shadow in a dark room is actually an attacker. Visual hallucinations also occur. The small living creatures which may be seen in delirium tremens are the best-known example.¹⁹

(We will return to the subject of ‘illusions’ presently.) Delirium is far from unusual, and some of its causes, which include pain, dehydration and trauma, are among the soldier’s occupational hazards.²⁰

It is perhaps worth briefly stopping to consider the possibility that some of the eyewitnesses reporting battlefield epiphanies were suffering from chronic psychiatric conditions predisposing them to hallucinate. Though such conditions can scarcely have been common, ancient armies must regularly have contained a small number of patients in their ranks. Let us take schizophrenia, the mental illness associated most closely in the popular mind with hallucinations (though schizophrenics’ hallucinations are, in fact, more commonly auditory than visual). Work on the epidemiology of schizophrenia has not produced uniform results, but it is likely that a military force numbering in the low thousands would have included several schizophrenics.²¹

¹⁸A.Sims, C.Mundt, P.Berner and A.Barocka, ‘Descriptive Phenomenology’ in M.G.Gelder, J.J.López-Ibor and N.Andreasen, *New Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry*, Oxford 2000, 58.

¹⁹D.Gill and R.Mayou, ‘Delirium’ in Gelder *et al.* (n.15), 382f.

²⁰Other potential causes of delirium include infection, heatstroke and intoxication with alcohol: *vide* D.Gill and R.Mayou, ‘Delirium’ in Gelder *et al.* (n.15), 384f; M.G.Gelder, R.Mayou and P.Cowen, *Shorter Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry*⁴, Oxford 2001, 404. I should perhaps say here that I think it unlikely that troops regularly went into battle intoxicated, or even nearly so, as Victor Hanson has claimed (*vide* Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, London 1989, 126-131).

²¹*Vide* generally A.Jablensky, ‘An Epidemiology of Schizophrenia’ in Gelder *et al.* (n.15), 587-591. Most studies suggest a modal level of prevalence of 1.4-4.6 per 1000 population, but Jablensky warns that this statistic is rather a crude index because of ‘demographic differences between populations with regard to factors such as age-specific mortality and migration’. As to incidence (that is, the annual number of first onset cases), two synthetic analyses of

A strong argument against this suggestion is that the testimony of people suffering from psychiatric disorders would not have been taken seriously by their comrades or superiors and would not have entered the sorts of sources in which the surviving notices of epiphanies appear.²² On the other hand, it is likely that mentally ill individuals would not always have been recognised as such.

It is possible for battlefield hallucinations to be seen simultaneously by numbers of people. This goes in particular for situations in which the soldiers anticipate or have been prepared for the appearance of supernatural friends or foes, and we may note that in case number 16 the intervention of Apollo and two virgin goddesses had actually been promised by an oracle.²³ Cicero himself appears to have believed that the resultant expectation of divine intervention provided sufficient explanation for this particular epiphany,²⁴ and modern psychiatrists might well agree with him, though they would perhaps speak in more technical terms of the collective preparation and recall of a 'perceptual template':

It may be that the psychophysiological basis for *recognition* requires the subconscious preparation of a perceptual template (e.g., a previously seen object) against which to match the incoming information for identification, significance, and meaning in terms of past experience. If some real but unrecognized object is present, the perceptual template emerges as an illusion. In the absence of a reality object, it is perceived as an hallucination. This accounts for the specificity of collective visions when they occur. For

different sets of studies suggests respective ranges of 0.17-0.54 and 0.16-0.42 per 1000 (using a broad definition of the illness). Schizophrenia among younger adults seems to be markedly more common in men than in women, and Jablensky observes that '[t]he evidence that psychosocial factors or culture play an aetiological role in schizophrenia is... weak' (592).

²²It may be objected that mentally ill people in some societies are accorded special religious and social status precisely because of their ability to see and hear the gods and their manifestations, but the reports of battlefield epiphanies which we find in the Greek sources are never framed as the private mystical experiences of individual seers, but rather as concrete and public events.

²³Something similar had allegedly happened in case number 2, and in two further instances the beings who appeared had apparently been invoked before the battle (3 and 8). We must remember, however, that the accounts of epiphanies 2 and 3 seems rather less credible than most of the others.

²⁴Justin's account, which may or may not be trustworthy on this point, also suggests that there was considerable excitement at the time, which cannot have contributed much to the subjects' mental equilibrium.

example, among shipwreck survivors floating at sea, a shouted suggestion may cause everyone to see the same nonexistent ship projected against the blank screen of empty sea and sky.²⁵

Louis J. West, the physician whom I have just cited, refers in his notes to a specific case-study of a group of 11 shipwrecked British sailors published during the Second World War. This study is of considerable interest to us, though its details are not quite as clear-cut as West seems to imply. The shipwreck occurred in June 1940, and resulted in a group of sailors having to spend around 65 hours in Carley floats in a state of extreme exhaustion and without food or water. The reports of their recollections are sometimes vague or ambiguous, but they seem to have hallucinated, individually and collectively, an interesting range of sights, including ships, orange trees, dockyards, aircraft and a bar, as well as apparently misidentifying some natural phenomena. In every case, it may be said that they saw things that, under the circumstances, they had some reason to be desirous of seeing. In the case of the collective visions, however, there is additional evidence that they were actively encouraging each other to see the sights concerned. Admittedly, the sailors were in an unusually desperate condition, but their experiences may shed at least some light on the phenomenon of battlefield epiphanies: indeed, the physician who wrote up the case explicitly compared their hallucinations to the Angels of Mons and other military apparitions.²⁶

As a final point here, we may note that a psychological explanation exists even for the blinding of Epizelos, the witness to epiphany number 4. Citing parallels from both world wars and from the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in Cambodia, Lawrence Tritle has convincingly argued for seeing it as an example of a 'conversion disorder' brought on by stress and psychological trauma. He writes:

At Marathon Epizelus watched the man beside him die - clearly a traumatic event. This act, plus the added stress of fighting the Persians, a new enemy, for the first time, pushed Epizelus beyond breaking-point and his mind

²⁵L.J. West, 'A Clinical and Theoretical Overview of Hallucinatory Phenomena', *Hallucinations*, R.K. Siegel and id. ed., New York 1975, 306.

²⁶As well as to an infectious series of sightings of the Virgin Mary in 1930s Belgium: *vide* E.W. Anderson, 'Abnormal Mental States in Survivors, with Special Reference to Collective Hallucinations', *Journal of the Royal Naval Medical Service* 28 (1942), 361-377.

simply snapped so as to protect the body. Hence the lifelong blindness that Herodotus reports[.]²⁷

Today, the unfortunate man would probably be diagnosed with PTSD.

Enough has now been said to suggest that we might look no further for an explanation for battlefield epiphanies than the minds of those who report them. Moving on to explanation number four, however, we may suggest that soldiers labouring under various sorts of psychological strain or disorder might sometimes be assisted in hallucinating by natural phenomena, unusual meteorological conditions and so forth. We are dealing here with a phenomenon referred to in the medical literature as ‘illusion’:

[Illusions] occur when the general level of sensory stimulation is reduced and when attention is now focused on the relevant sensory modality. For example, at dusk the outline of a bush may be perceived at first as that of a man, though not when attention is focused on the outline. Illusions occur also when the level of consciousness is reduced as in delirium... In both a healthy state and in delirium, illusions are more likely when the person is anxious. Thus in a dark lane a frightened person is more likely than a calm person to misperceive the outline of a bush as that of a man.²⁸

Now, nothing in our knowledge of ancient military history suggests that battles regularly began or dragged on until after dark, and a soldier seeming to see an epiphany of a god or hero would be likely immediately to transfer his attention to and focus it upon the phenomenon. On the other hand, we have already noted that it is plausible that some of the soldiers who witnessed epiphanies were delirious - and, even in the absence of actual delirium, general stress and tiredness might play strange tricks on any hoplite’s perceptive faculties. In all, the illusion hypothesis may provide us with some assistance at least.

²⁷L.A.Trittle, *From Melos to My Lai*, London 2000, 64. The final sentence ends with the suggestion, surely quite unwarranted, that the epiphany story was a piece of ‘heroic inspired myth-making to explain what to Epizelus and his contemporaries was unexplainable’.

²⁸Gelder *et al.* (n.17), 8f.

Some intriguing modern evidence may be cited in this connection: returning to Mons, on 14th September 1914, the *Evening News* printed a letter from ‘a distinguished Lieutenant-Colonel’ who while riding across the countryside in a state of some fatigue had seen “a very large body of horsemen [] riding across the fields and going in the same direction as we were going.” The apparition had been seen by ‘many men’ in the colonel’s contingent, including two of his fellow officers.²⁹ This incident took place at night, though the writer claims rather defensively that it was ‘not very dark’, and it seems likely to me that the ‘horsemen’ had some sort of existence outside the minds of the soldiers who saw them (the outlines of a series of bushes?!). Certainly, there is no reason to suspect a mass hallucination divorced from any reality-object.

It is even possible that human warriors or unusual appearance or dress might be mistaken in the heat of battle for gods and heroes - or, for that matter, so adorned and deployed by their commanders as to present the appearance of a god or hero to the enemy. Pritchett mentions several examples of such things happening, including most notably that involving Isadas son of Phoibidas, though a number of them appear not to concern battlefield epiphanies in our understanding of the term (one of them, for example, is the much-discussed Phye episode).³⁰

Finally, pure misinterpretation of natural phenomena unaided by illusory misperception may explain a small number of epiphanies: report 12, for example, may be accounted for in these terms, though quite what the phenomenon concerned was in this case remains obscure. (The phenomenon that comes first to the mind of the layman - St Elmo’s Fire - is not a candidate if Plutarch’s account is to be trusted, since St Elmo’s Fire appears only around elevated structures such as masts.) The twin stars might, on the other hand, have been an authentic hallucination of the ‘elementary’ kind - that is, of a kind not involving complex imagery.

²⁹*Vide* Terraine (n.7), 18f.

³⁰20, 24 n.54, 26, 28, 35f, 44-46. On Isadas, *vide* further P.A.Cartledge, *The Spartans*, London 2002, 237-239.

III

It may thus be seen that most ancient Greek battlefield epiphanies can be accounted for in convincing and rationalistic terms that do not entail attacking the sincerity or credibility of our sources. Though the focus of this paper has been rather narrow, moreover, its conclusions offer one possible means of explaining at least some of the many other paranormal phenomena recorded in military (and, for that matter, non-military) contexts. Further research on this point would be most welcome, and would surely prove highly illuminating.

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