Nothing new Under the Sun
The Ancient History of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

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Most psychological and psychiatric text books quote Herodotus’ account of the Athenian spear carrier Epizelus’ psychogenic blindness following the Marathon Wars in 490 BC as the first report of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Walid’s interest in the history and archaeology of Iraq made him read the medical cuneiform texts, translated into English by the American Assyriologist Prof JoAnn Scurlock (Scurlock and Andersen, 2005).

Walid brought new insights from his archaeological readings into the trauma therapy he was doing under the supervision of Jamie Hacker Hughes. The texts, excavated in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), indicate that there were much earlier reports of PTSD than Herodotus, with much more detailed psychopathology. The authors were successful in publishing these reports in Early Science and Medicine in December 2014, after the article was reviewed by Professor Scurlock, who added many useful insights (Abdul-Hamid & Hacker Hughes, 2014). The media became interested in the article in January 2015 and the article went viral in the world media. It was reported to us by Anglia Ruskin University Finance Department that the article made £300,000 worth publicity for the University!

Mesopotamia is considered by historians as the cradle of a civilization during almost 30 centuries (3200-539 BC). The first cuneiform text was written around 3200 BC in Uruk in southern Iraq during the reign of the Sumerian dynasty.

Cuneiform, means literally ‘wedge-shaped’. It is the form of Mesopotamian writing made by pressing a reed stylus onto fresh clay that would then be left to dry and baked in an oven to become hard and brick-like. Almost half a million cuneiform tablets written by the ancient Iraqis have been discovered (Bottero, 2001, p. 90). Several hundred of these tablets comprised medical texts, mainly
consisting of handbooks and collections of prescriptions. Diagnosis had an important role in medical practice and the management of disease in ancient Iraq. Diagnostic manuals were kept, usually in the form of: *If a person suffers from so and so symptoms then he has so and so diagnosis and he will have so and so prognosis.*

The Assyrians were the later dynasties that governed Mesopotamia between the years 1300-609 BC. Their large empire extended from Iran in the east to Egypt in the west. They therefore needed a substantial army to keep order. The army was accompanied by the Mesopotamian physicians who were called ‘ašipus’. These ‘ašipus’ kept records of both physical and psychological trauma suffered by Assyrian soldiers, on the tablets described above. The cases translated by Scurlock and published by us gave surprising accounts of symptoms we now recognise as PTSD. Flashbacks and dreams were explained as the spirits of the people killed by the Assyrian soldier coming back to haunt him (Scurlock and Andersen, 2005, p. 429-430).