



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**The application format has been changed since this application was submitted.** You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see above link).

Project Title: The Sacred Band of Thebes and the Last Days of Greek Freedom (379–338 B.C.)

Institution: Bard College

Project Director: James Romm

Grant Program: Public Scholars

Love's Warriors: The Sacred Band of Thebes and the Last Days of Greek Freedom  
James Romm, Bard College

Can it be that a turning point in Greek history – the overthrow of Spartan power in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, and the sudden rise of Thebes – was due to a corps of only 300 elite Theban soldiers? And that this Sacred Band, as the Greeks called it, was made up of pairs of *erastai* and *erômenoi*, older lovers and their younger beloveds, stationed side by side and spurred to deeds of prowess by mutual devotion? That is the account given by Plutarch, and though most historians believe it, few have explored the questions it raises, and none have told the tale that surrounds it for general readers: How a democratically-governed underdog, Thebes, triumphed over the ages-old hegemony of Sparta, then was smashed in turn when its own tactics were turned against it by a new superpower, imperial Macedon. After an unbroken string of victories starting from its creation in 379, the Sacred Band was destroyed at the Battle of Chaeronea by Alexander the Great, and with them died the last hopes for a free and autonomous Hellas. A mass grave that likely holds the Band's remains, topped by a marble statue of a mourning lion, can be seen today at the battle's site in south-central Greece, a shrine to the last days of Greek freedom.

My book *Love's Warriors* will be the first-ever in-depth account of the Sacred Band of Thebes, as well as the first non-specialized narrative of a crucial four decades of Greek history. The era of the Sacred Band saw dramatic changes in land warfare, in balance-of-power politics, and in Greek ideas surrounding government, social mores, and, not least importantly, male sexual relations. Plato's *Symposium*, composed at the same moment the Sacred Band was formed, celebrates the power of erotic love to inspire souls toward virtue. In *Love's Warriors* I will show that the genesis of this landmark philosophic text may well be connected to Theban innovations, and that new ideas about male pair-bonding, including the previously unimagined possibility of a life-long same-sex union, were taking root simultaneously among political leaders at Thebes and in Plato's Academy at Athens. Indeed Plato's philosophic career, which almost precisely spans the era of the Sacred Band, will form a secondary thread in my book, intersecting the main narrative line at key points so as to expand its range and depth.

The story of *Love's Warriors* stands at a uniquely Greek intersection of warfare, moral philosophy, and the construction of gender and sexuality. It will intrigue readers from all three areas of inquiry, as well as those concerned with the unique role that democracy has played in world history. Though less celebrated than 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens, 4<sup>th</sup>-century Thebes was likewise a democratic power, and the struggles it waged against Sparta and other foes were framed in ideological terms. Sparta at this time was led by a hereditary monarch, Agesilaus, who for decades had relied on brute force and authoritarian methods to dominate central Greece. By contrast the leaders of Thebes, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, were progressives, schooled at Athens, who held an elective office for successive one-year terms. They formed the Sacred Band in 379 as a counterweight to the feared Spartan red-cloaks who, in the three years prior, had subjected Thebes to a military occupation. Within the decade, Epaminondas would lead a 'freedom march' deep into Spartan territory and liberate the helots, a brutally oppressed class of Greek slaves whose labor fed Sparta's warrior caste. Sparta's statist strength was broken forever, but the golden age of Thebes was doomed to be short-lived.

It's astonishing that a story this rich, populated by compelling and vivid characters, is little known today, but the biases of our ancient sources explain its obscurity. Whereas the struggle of Athens against Sparta had Thucydides to record it, a brilliant Athenian with deep concern for democratic ideals, the struggle of Thebes against Sparta was chronicled by the more light-weight Xenophon, a philo-Spartan who lived for a time at Sparta and sent his sons into rigorous Spartan boot camps. Xenophon wrote his *Hellenica* from a pro-Spartan stance and swept Theban heroism, including that of the Sacred Band and its leaders, under the rug. Not until centuries later did Plutarch, a native of Chaeronea, tell the full story of the Band and its leaders, Epaminondas and Pelopidas, in two of his *Parallel Lives*; but the *Epaminondas* was subsequently

lost when an early manuscript was damaged. Willful omissions and textual gaps have thus combined to largely efface the Theban golden age for modern readers. Victor Davis Hanson has recently made this era the subject of a historical novel, *The End of Sparta*, but no non-fiction book has dealt with it since John Buckler's 1980 *The Theban Hegemony*, and that was a scholarly treatment inaccessible to the wider public.

An episode that is both historically crucial but also unknown to readers offers a vital resource to the non-fiction author, the chance to build suspense. Readers who did not know the Sacred Band existed will certainly not anticipate the twists and turns that led to its demise. In the later stages of my narrative, they will be surprised by the entry onto the scene of Alexander the Great, heir to command of an army that had been largely rebuilt along Theban lines (Alexander's father, Philip, had lived at Thebes for years before assuming the Macedonian throne). Tension will build as a showdown looms between Thebes and the expansionist regime in Macedon. The unforeseen outcome – the cruel annihilation of the Sacred Band by Alexander's cavalry charges at Chaeronea – will land like a hammer blow, followed by an even more shocking coda: Though stripped of its chief infantry weapon, Thebes rebelled against Macedon in 335, three years after Chaeronea; when the uprising failed, Alexander butchered thousands, then razed Thebes to the ground. With this atrocity he sent a message that revolt would not be tolerated. An entire European city suddenly ceased to exist. Greek political self-determination came to a halt, and would not be recovered until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The combination this story offers, of high narrative tension and far-reaching historical consequence, has been key to the success of my two previous works of non-fiction. In *Ghost on the Throne: The Death of Alexander the Great and the War for Crown and Empire* (Knopf 2011), I dealt with the first seven years of the Wars of the Successors, the global struggle for dominance among Alexander's top officers. In a complex story, with action often taking place simultaneously in separate arenas on three continents, I took as my central thread the career of a little-known Greek general, Eumenes of Cardia; this man's defeat, as I showed, ensured the break-up of Alexander's empire into the five kingdoms of the Hellenistic age. Similarly in *Dying Every Day: Seneca at the Court of Nero* (Knopf 2014), I followed the intertwining political and literary careers of Seneca the Younger, demonstrating that the fall of Nero, and the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, was partly due to Seneca's failure to maintain his influence at court. In both books, suspense about the fate of the central figure drives the narrative forward, allowing the story's larger repercussions to unfold. Momentum leads to meaning, or, as Barbara Tuchman famously put it, "I want the reader to turn the page and keep on turning until the end."

My work on these two books, and on earlier editorial projects, has provided a valuable springboard for *Love's Warriors*. Though its time span falls a few years later than the endpoint of my new book, *Ghost on the Throne* has many of the same military themes and similarly includes Alexander the Great as a central figure. Prior to writing *Ghost*, I spent several years annotating, and writing appendices to, *The Landmark Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander* (Pantheon 2010), a new edition of the principal ancient account of Alexander's reign. Research for both these projects has given me a thorough grounding in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, an era in which land warfare tactics, and the roles played by soldiers in battle and in society, were changing rapidly. In both *Ghost on the Throne* and *The Landmark Arrian*, I developed ways of making the mechanics of Greek land battle clear, and exciting, to general readers. To now bring to life for such readers the Battle of Leuctra, where the Sacred Band helped crush the 'invincible' Spartans, or the Battle of Chaeronea, where the Band was crushed in turn by Alexander, will require the tools of a trained scholar and a seasoned storyteller, and over the past fifteen years I have honed both sets of tools.

As in earlier projects, I will ground *Love's Warriors* in primary sources, carefully examined, and will unpack, in detailed endnotes, the interpretive problems they present. (Both *Ghost on the Throne* and *Dying Every Day* carried roughly one page of notes for every five pages of text.) If readers understand how things are known about the past, and how much is *not* known, they will have confidence in the factuality of events, an essential component of immersive non-

fiction. The problem of Xenophon's silence about the Sacred Band in *Hellenica* and *Agésilas* will be fully dealt with, and the account of the Theban golden age by Plutarch, in *Pelopidas* and other works, will be interrogated. Plato's *Symposium* will loom large as well, since, on my reading, that dialogue bears contemporary witness to the victories of the Sacred Band. My fluent knowledge of ancient Greek will be an important resource in researching these texts, as well as other evidence in Diodorus Siculus, Athenaeus, and the fragments of Theopompus and Ephorus. Latin fluency will also come into play in the case of Cornelius Nepos' biographies of several of my key figures. All passages quoted from these sources will be in my own translations.

One body of evidence that, as I hope, will greatly enrich *Love's Warriors* involves the mass burial uncovered at Chaeronea beneath its famous marble lion. The grave contained 254 male skeletons laid out in seven rows, leading many scholars to identify it as the last resting place of the Sacred Band. Oxford historian John Ma further supposes that an eighth row of skeletons lies beyond the perimeter of the excavation, bringing the number of the dead very close to 300 and completing the standard eight-deep formation of a Greek infantry phalanx. The Sacred Band, that is, were likely buried not only where they fell, but as they stood, in their final battle. Though most of these skeletons have been reinterred, two remain above ground in Greek museums along with weaponry and gear recovered from the grave. With the help of Greek curators and other specialists, I plan to study this material anew in hopes of proving that it indeed belonged to the Sacred Band; if that thesis is correct, much more can be learned from these remains about who the Band were and how they fought. To this end I have set aside the coming June for a research trip to Athens and Chaeronea, as well as a consultation with Professor Ma at Oxford. During my Greek trip I will also explore the recent excavations at modern Thiva, ancient Thebes, with the help of Bucknell archaeologists Kevin Daly and Stephanie Larson.

Other research for *Love's Warriors* is already well underway. In the Fall of 2017 I made several forays to New York libraries and spent time at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C., which houses one of the most complete Classics collections in the U.S. My work plan calls for another three months of part-time research during the current semester, while I also carry out teaching and administrative duties at Bard College. Full-time writing will get underway in July and continue through the academic year 2018-'19, provided that grant support enables me to take a leave of absence from teaching. My two previous books were written in similar time frames; *Dying Every Day* came to fruition during the year I spent as a Cullman fellow at the New York Public Library. I am confident that, if given grant support for the ten months I have requested, I will complete a manuscript of about 85,000 words in June 2019.

*Love's Warriors* has already been acquired by Scribner and will be edited by Sally Howe. Scribner will publish the book in hardcover in Spring 2020 and thereafter plans an extensive publicity campaign, pitched at a wide non-fiction readership. There is reason to hope the book will be widely reviewed, given the number of periodicals that have taken note of my previous books (*Dying Every Day* was reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *New Yorker*). As I have done in the past, I will seek to place op-ed essays in periodicals and on-line venues at the time of publication, showing the relevance of my story to contemporary topics such as same-sex marriage, the place of gay soldiers in the military, and the global struggle between democratic and authoritarian political systems.

It remains for me to briefly survey the contents of *Love's Warriors*. The book will cover a 45-year span, but not at a uniform pace; the time scale will expand where crucial events call for more detailed treatment. Thus the first chapter will cover only a few weeks of 379 BC, in which a covert operation involving a small band of Theban democrats, dressed as women but carrying concealed daggers, liberated Thebes from Spartan occupation. The plot, which succeeded against all odds, was led by the young firebrand Pelopidas, whose character will here be explored. His nemesis on the Spartan side was Agésilas, who had sanctioned the military takeover of Thebes

and tried desperately to preserve it. The contrast between these two personalities will help embody the ideological opposition between Thebes and Sparta, the book's principal political axis.

The years 378 to 372 BC, the subject of the next two chapters, saw the creation of the Sacred Band and the rise to prominence of Epaminondas, the book's most heroic figure. Supposedly a student of Lysis of Tarentum, the last of the original Pythagoreans, Epaminondas brought new ideas and new energy to the boeotarchy, the board of elected governors on which he served year by year. His political alliance with Pelopidas, commander of the Sacred Band, was a partnership that brought out the best qualities in both men. My scene will shift at several points to Athens, where Plato, likewise seeking to bring new energy into Greek politics, presided over the newly-established Academy. Plato's *Symposium* speaks reverently of the power of male eros and imagines an army corps much like the Sacred Band; it may well attest, as I will argue, to the deep impression Thebes had made on the Greek world with its initial victories over Sparta.

Theban fortunes soared in the years 371 to 369, as my next two chapters relate. At a treaty conference sponsored by Sparta and designed to further Spartan interests, Epaminondas unexpectedly took the floor to denounce Agesilaus before the assembled diplomats of Greece. Fuming, the Spartan king demanded that the signatures of the Thebans be stricken from the treaty, essentially a declaration of war. Spartan armies invaded Theban territory only weeks later, and Epaminondas insisted on meeting them in the field, not cowering behind protective walls. At the Battle of Leuctra he used novel tactics, including strategic deployment of the Sacred Band, to rout a Spartan land army in an open field battle – a feat that stunned the Greek world. Another shock arrived the following year when Thebes invaded the Spartan homeland and nearly captured the city. Sparta survived, but its myth of invincibility was punctured, and Epaminondas also stripped it of the helots whose slave labor fed its warrior class.

Struggles with tyrants occupied both the Theban leadership and the Platonic Academy in the 360's. Pelopidas twice ventured northward to confront Alexander of Pherae, a ruthless despot who reportedly had his enemies torn apart by hunting dogs. Imprisoned by this monster, but freed after a daring sally by Epaminondas, Pelopidas finally lost his life mounting a rash battlefield charge at his foe. Plato meanwhile was navigating the treacherous court of Dionysius II, the wealthy, debauched ruler of Syracuse; he too was imprisoned and nearly killed. Throughout this period Epaminondas continued to harass the Spartans and press his advantage, but at Mantinea in 364 he pressed it too far and was killed by a spear-thrust to the chest.

The deaths of Epaminondas and Pelopidas left Thebes leaderless, but the great age of the Sacred Band was far from over. New challenges arose for Thebes in the 350's from neighboring Phocis, an upstart power that had seized control of the treasury of Apollo housed in the temple of Delphi. The 'Sacred War,' as it is termed, brought the Sacred Band, presumably refreshed by new recruits, into action for more than a decade of grinding combat. Sparta meanwhile remained hobbled and shrunken, and it too lacked direction after Agesilaus, still leading troops in the field in his mid-eighties, finally succumbed to an illness. Plato passed from the scene in 347 with his hopes for Dionysius II, and for the redeeming power of eros, far from realized, but his path-breaking Academy endured.

My final chapters will explore two new entrants in the Aegean power struggle, Philip II of Macedon and his son Alexander, on whose rising fortunes the fate of Thebes now rested. Philip had lived at Thebes in the late 360's as part of a treaty arrangement; he observed the Sacred Band, and other Theban innovations, at first hand. His redesign of the Macedonian army in 359 owed much to his Theban sojourn. Thus, in a tragic irony of history, the very success of Thebes helped spawn a new superpower that would end the city's golden age and, with it, the classical era of all Hellas. Alexander the Great's destruction of the Sacred Band, and then of Thebes itself, will bring a heavy curtain down on my story.

I will conclude *Love's Warriors* with an epilogue on the mass grave at Chaeronea and the mourning lion that sits above it, a lonely memorial to the Sacred Band and the last days of Greek freedom.

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