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Greece, the Hellenistic World and the Rise of Rome

Edited by Philip Sabin, Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby

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INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF
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CHAPTER 1

THE MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY OF
ANCIENT WARFARE

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

Western military scholarship has a long and distinguished history, beginning with the classical Greeks themselves. Originally fourth-century BC essays such as Xenophon's *Cavalry Commander* or Aeneas Tacticus' *On the Defence of Fortified Positions* were probably intended as pragmatic guides for commanders in the field. These works were not – as was often true of contemporary military writing in the non-Western tradition – integrated within larger religious or philosophical concerns. Nor were they subject to political censorship by the state. The popularity of such treatises apparently hinged on the degree to which they met real needs and were found useful by generals and military planners of the city-state.

By Hellenistic and Roman times formal contemplation about war-making became more academic and theoretical, both in the scientific realm (Heron and Philo on the construction of war-catapults) and on matters tactical (Posidonius and Asclepiodotus concerning the Macedonian phalanx) – in addition to becoming simply antiquarian, such as the collections of stratagems by Frontinus and Polyaeus. Most Roman handbooks are lost, but Vegetius' *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, written sometime around AD 400, survives and provides some idea of the level of practical detail and standardization with which such manuals sought to provide Roman officials.

A number of excellent texts, translations and commentaries of nearly all these ancient military theorists has now appeared to replace earlier and often inexact editions. The recent interest in such work is not merely the result of the continual advance of classical scholarship, but rather reflects a renewed appreciation for the value of these observers as empiricists rather than dry pedants. Often even the more abstract writers such as Asclepiodotus and Onasander contain invaluable information on a variety of both narrow and quite broad topics from the nomenclature of ancient drill to consideration of what properly should constitute reasonable causes of war.¹

¹ Aeneas Tacticus: the reliable work of the Illinois Greek Club (1923) and Köchly and Rüstow (1853–5) has now been expanded, and in some cases replaced, by Whitehead (1990); Polyaeus: Krentz and Wheeler (1994); Arrian: Devoto (1993); Aelian: Devine (1989); Vegetius: Milner (1993). Marsden (1969), (1971) on the mechanical writers remains invaluable. For the *Notitia Dignitatum*, a late Roman

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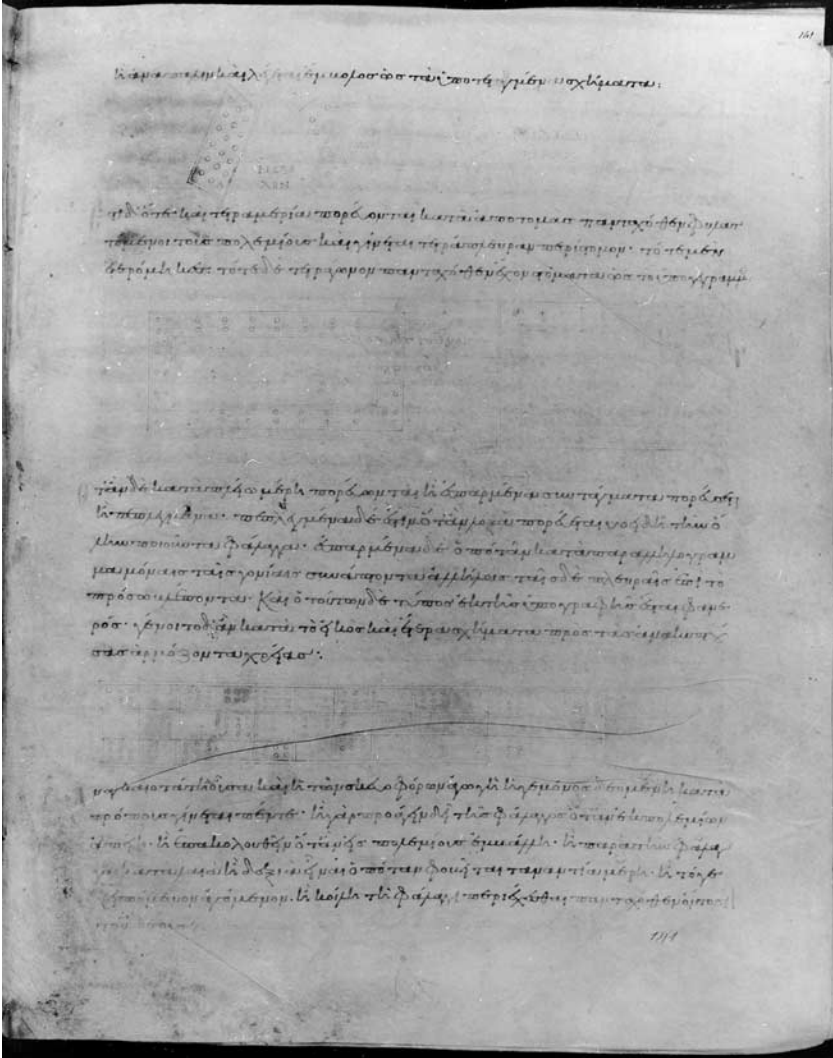
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Figure 1.1 Page from a tenth-century Byzantine copy of Asclepiodotus' *Art of Tactics*, with drawings of 'chequerboard' and other formations.

Although Greek philosophers accepted both the ubiquity and inevitability of state conflict, no single analytical or philosophical monograph on the nature of warfare exists in either Greek or Latin literature. The lamentable absence of such systematic ancient discussions in part may explain the

treitise that outlines the structure of civilian and military governance of the Empire, see Goodburn and Bartholomew (1976); Hoffmann (1969–70).

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similar dearth of a modern scholarly work on the place of war within Greek and Roman intellectual life at large – and hence the legacy of the classical military tradition in later Western culture. Although there exists an extensive scholarly bibliography about the conduct of war in the ancient world, very little work has been devoted to how classical warfare was seen abstractly by Greek and Roman thinkers themselves.²

Military scholarship about ancient warfare continued in both applied and theoretical approaches through the Middle Ages (the works on Roman military and civic foundations by Egidio Colonna and Christine Pisan), into the Renaissance (Machiavelli and Maurice of Nassau) and early Enlightenment (Henri de Rohan and Chevalier de Folard).³ However, by the nineteenth century the rise of industrial warfare and sophisticated military technology meant that rarely were practical lessons any longer to be learned from the catapults, pikes and swords of the ancient world. Research into the classical world at war evolved into an armchair historical rather than a didactic exercise. Europeans increasingly were more apt to elucidate ancient fighting from their own combat experience than to look back to the Greeks and Romans for contemporary guidance in killing one another.⁴

While nineteenth-century ancient military historians themselves were often officers, nevertheless the modern discipline was formally born under the aegis of the renaissance in classical scholarship of the times. The appearance by the mid-nineteenth century of comprehensive lexica of the classical languages, epigraphical compendia, scholarly journals and systematic archaeological exploration and publication meant that ancient fighting would not remain the domain of retired officers or interested autodidacts. Instead, serious thinking about classical war was properly to be explored in universities through reference to ancient Greek and Roman texts and inscriptions, and first-hand reconnaissance of the topography of Greece and Rome. Consequently, at the dawn of ancient military historiography a paradox arose: those in the university most qualified to analyse ancient literary evidence, inscriptions and archaeological data concerning classical warfare were by their very nature as academics often most removed from pragmatic knowledge of the battlefield.

² Dawson (1996), Kagan (1995), and Hanson (2001) emphasize the classical acceptance of the inevitability of conflict and the influence of such attitudes about warfare in later Western culture. Some preliminary work on perceptions of war in Greek literature are found in Arnould (1981) and Spiegel (1990).

³ The interest in classical warfare shown by later European theorists is discussed in Dawson (1996) 169–91; Garland (1975) 15–21; Earle (1971) 3–25, 260–86.

⁴ On occasion, however, nineteenth-century generals claimed to have benefited from classical military doctrine, especially the tactics of envelopment such as Hannibal's plan at Cannae. See Kersézt (1980); von Schlieffen (1931); and in general Ardant du Picq (1987).

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Figure 1.2 Illustrations from the pamphlet *Mars his Field*, first printed by Roger Daniell in 1595, showing drill positions for pikemen equipped with shield and spear, a type of infantry recently introduced under the influence of ancient military treatises.

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At first, however, a gifted generation of Germans bridged the wide divide between philology and the traditional prerequisites of military pragmatism. True, it is easy now to find fault with the rigidity and narrowness of the *Handbücher* of Delbrück, Droysen, Köchly and Rüstow, and Kromayer and Veith, or the articles under the traditional rubrics such as *legio* or phalanx in the multi-volume *Real-Encyclopädie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*.⁵ Most of these authors were exclusively aristocratic in outlook. They were also occasionally overtly militaristic and nationalistic, viewing ancient war either as a timeless tactical or strategic science of the ages, or simply an extension of classical politics and diplomacy with little reference to social and economic realities of the Greeks and Romans. Despite the inclusion of the formal academic discipline of classical military history in the university, the feeling still persisted in Germany that to write about ancient warfare, scholars should have some real experience with contemporary command and be sensitive to the interplay between conflict and politics. That spirit is perhaps best epitomized in the career of Hans Delbrück, the author of a multi-volume history of Western warfare, who was at various times an officer in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, member of the German Reichstag, tutor to the German royal family and historian at the University of Berlin.

This first generation of military historians is owed a great deal of credit, inasmuch as their practical work never abandoned the philological basis for military history – the Greek and Latin terms for military formations and operations were established; the key classical passages identified and collated, and the main battles of Greek and Roman history reconstructed through a combination of topography and philology. But even more importantly these mostly German scholars also brought a utilitarian awareness of how armies drilled and functioned in the field – essential in understanding the close-ordered formations of the phalanx and legion. English historians, of course, have long been bothered by Delbrück's ironclad method of *Sachkritik* – critiquing military operations as recorded in ancient accounts on the basis of perceived scientific plausibility – which often degenerated into rejecting descriptions in Herodotus or Caesar through wooden comparisons with the experience and practice of the contemporary German army. In addition, the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars only accentuated the vast differences between German and British and American approaches to writing about ancient armies, and perhaps led to a general neglect in the English-speaking world of many Prussian-authored books and articles on ancient tactics and drill.

⁵ Delbrück (1975); Droysen (1889); Köchly and Rustow (1852); Kromayer and Veith (1928); Lammert (1938); Ritterling (1925). Cf. the remarks of Craig (1971) 282: 'The military historian has generally been a kind of misfit, regarded with suspicion by both his professional colleagues and by the military men whose activities he seeks to portray.'

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Nevertheless, Delbrück first enshrined the vital concept that military historians must assess ancient figures concerning army size, casualties and expenditures within scientific, geographical and demographic parameters – Herodotus' numbers for Xerxes' invasion are as exaggerated as Caesar's boasts of the gargantuan size of enemy Helvetian migrations in Gaul. In some sense, all later pragmatic work in areas as diverse as logistics, ship design or agricultural devastation follow in Delbrück's spirit of subjecting ancient battle accounts to consideration of what men and their tools are capable of in the physical world, to what he called 'the reality of the thing'.⁶

If there is less use of *Sachkritik* in present studies of the ancient world at war, it is not so much attributable to the excesses of Delbrück's method – albeit both real and documented – as to the dearth of first-hand experience on the part of classicists with relevant army life and the changing nature of war itself. Modern scholars have been just as ready as Delbrück to question the accuracy of ancient descriptions, but rarely have they been able to draw on any reservoir of similar practical military expertise. After the First World War most European armies were without horses, abandoned edged weapons and relied less on drilling and marching – and so for the first time in a 2,500-year Western military tradition contemporary soldiers were radically different forces from phalangites and legionaries of the classical past. In matters of equipment and tactics the combatants of the Second World War or Vietnam, then, had little in common with Alexander's phalangites.

In one instance at least, the blinkered Germanic interpretation of classical military history as the nexus of war and politics has endured and its legacy is still felt today. The monumental work of W. K. Pritchett – in many ways the pre-eminent ancient Greek military historian of the twentieth century – and other standard texts on classical armies by F. E. Adcock, J. K. Anderson, R. Davies, L. Keppie, J. Lazenby, R. E. Smith, G. R. Watson and G. Webster follow in this hallowed tradition of identifying key vocabulary, reviewing recruitment and equipment with attention to archaeological finds, reconstructing tactical and strategic practices from ancient texts and then interpreting war largely as an affair of the state. In none of these fine surveys is there any expressed need to identify the purpose of ancient military history. The authors instead assume that war always was – and is – integral to European society, and thus serves as one of the touchstones for understanding Greek and Roman civilization in general.⁷

⁶ See, e.g., the reliance on practical considerations concerning logistics: Adams (1976); Engels (1978); Roth (1999); agriculture and warfare: Hanson (1998), (1999c); shipbuilding: Morrison and Coates (1996).

⁷ See Pritchett (1971–1991), (1994a). Cf. the general surveys of Adcock (1957); Anderson (1970); Davies (1989); Keppie (1984); Lazenby (1978), (1985), (1993), (1996); Parker (1971); Smith (1958); Watson (1983); Webster (1985). It is sometimes forgotten that Grundy (1948) presents an invaluable cultural and geographical analysis of classical Greek warfare. Knowledge from both Pritchett and Grundy is incorporated into contemporary scholarship far more than is formally cited.

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None of these introductory studies could be dismissed as nineteenth-century relics confined to mere tactics and strategy, despite their unquestioning adherence to the philological basis of classical scholarship and their Clausewitzian assumption that war was primarily an affair of states to keep or acquire political power. Despite the claims of social science and more recent theoretical interpretations, there is no reason to think such traditional positivist approaches to classical military history will decline. For now at least, questions as varied as the nature of the hoplite armour and the organization of the Roman legion are answerable only through close reliance on the hallowed triad of ancient texts, inscriptions and archaeological finds. Theory as of yet has not taught us how soldiers were armed, arrayed in battle or conducted themselves in combat. In that sense, traditionalists were only following the predilections of ancient historians like Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius and Caesar who saw war first-hand and wrote of it largely in the context of politics and statecraft.

After the First World War a few French, English and American students of ancient warfare, perhaps under the influence of the new disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, folk studies and sociology, broadened considerably the scope of military enquiry – even though they were not always sure that they could offer concrete answers to the broader questions that they had raised. At first, the expansion of the field was topical, not one of method – more fields of enquiry rather than revolutionary approaches and interpretations. Historians simply looked to a wider canvas without employing newer ideas about the reliability of ancient evidence or necessarily even pursuing the logical cultural ramifications of their own research. For example, new books about Greek mercenary service in the 1930s broached social questions of the conditions under which professional armies expanded, but they did so only narrowly within the framework of philology: identifying and tracing the vocabulary of bought soldiers through literature and inscriptions rather than investigating the imbalance in wealth that prompted such mass enlistments in the first places, much less recovering the ‘mentality’ of a hired phalangite.⁸

By the same token the prior comprehensive work in military topography by Kromayer and Veith was followed in spirit by W. K. Pritchett who exhibited similar reverence for the authority of ancient texts, but surveyed the military landscape of Greece through much wider lenses of religion, economics and cultural life in his reconstructions of ancient battles and campaigns.⁹ Many of the subsequent works of military topography and archaeology reflect this widening interest in cultural and social questions. How were fortifications financed and at what general cost to society? What

⁸ Contrast, e.g., the recent work of Marinovich (1988) and McKechnie (1989), on mercenaries and outsiders that emphasize cultural issues, with the standard introductions by Parke (1933) and Griffith (1935).

⁹ Pritchett (1965–92), (1971–91); Kromayer and Veith (1903–31).

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were the status and class of sailors who manned the fleet? Was the aristocracy enriched or ruined by wars? Yet such histories were still entirely empirical in their allegiance to the primacy of 'facts' drawn from excavation, epigraphy and literary texts, rarely questioning accepted traditions of conducting research.¹⁰

Changes in methods in addition to the expansion in the topics of enquiry, however, followed, most notably in France – reflecting a trust in contemporary anthropology and especially analyses from theories of structuralism that were in vogue by the 1960s. J.-P. Vernant, P. Vidal-Naquet, P. Ducrey and Y. Garlan were interested in ancient armies as tools of the state to kill enemies and occupy ground, less than as social institutions that reflected class tensions in the *polis* and Republic, or served as rites of passage for youths coming of age, or even relics of earlier and often pre-state tribal rituals.¹¹

Some of this continental influence upon English-speaking countries was apparent in the work of M. I. Finley and his students and admirers, who often wrote about classical warfare in terms of cult, ritual, psychology, gender, demography and cultural issues in general – with the assumption that ancient conflict was far more than the extension of politics by other means, if not a tragic aberration in its own right.¹² In that sense, by the 1970s the old species of military historian such as a Delbrück, Kromayer or Tarn was almost extinct, except for a few Roman military archaeologists.

Very few classicists at this time would have identified themselves exclusively as scholars of ancient warfare – or even have acknowledged that a discipline of 'military history' existed apart from anthropology and sociology. Less frequently did the terms of the past like 'art', 'practice' or 'science' find their way into titles connected with ancient warfare, inasmuch as classical scholarship was often uninterested in operations, battle narratives and reconstruction, and tactics and strategy.

Indeed, there was some question whether traditional military study of the ancient world would ever re-emerge with its emphasis on armies as

¹⁰ On the political and cultural aspects of fortifications, see, e.g., the representative work of Adam (1982); Lawrence (1979); Munn (1993); Ober (1985a); Winter (1971). Garlan (1974) is a model blend of archaeological, literary and practical information. For arms and armour, consult Bishop and Coulston (1993); Jarva (1995); Snodgrass (1964), (1967).

¹¹ See most prominently two collections from le Centre de Recherches Comparées sur les Sociétés Anciennes, Vernant (1968) and Brisson (1969b). Cf. also the economic studies of Garlan (1989), and Brulé and Oulhen (1997), in addition to those on religion by Lonis (1979), and sociology by Vidal-Naquet (1986).

¹² Finley (1981); and the respective collections on Greek and Roman warfare by Rich and Shipley (1993a), (1993b). Cf. too van Wees (2000b). On the disdain that military history can incur among humanists, see Oman (1969) 159: 'Both the medieval chronicler and the modern liberal historiographer had often no closer notion of the meaning of war than that it involves various horrors and is attended by a lamentable loss of life. Both classes strove to disguise their personal ignorance or dislike of military matters by deprecating their importance and significance in history.'

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fighting units and the story of wars between sovereign states. Other reasons also contributed to this reluctance to embrace military history in the ancient sense as the formal business of killing between national armies. Given the hundreds of millions of soldiers and civilians who perished in the twentieth century – a frightful carnage in comparison with the less lethal war-making of the nineteenth – and a growing disgust with nationalism, it was understandable that traditional military historians in all fields were in retreat. Many worried that their view of war as statecraft and as an inherently natural human enterprise might suggest to some either empathy with nationalist leaders who had caused such upheaval, or that their academic interest in ancient warfare was tantamount to approval of settling differences by force. As trust in political, strategic and tactical narrative declined, confidence grew that expertise in anthropology and sociology possessed universal applicability and thus might offer answers to fields as distant and unappealing as ancient military history in ways the so-called ‘experts’ of war could not.

The new theoretical treatment of military history as sociology for the most part avoided the age-old stigma of militarism and soon became more than a narrowly academic enterprise. Structuralist and comparative methods eventually found their way into handbooks for a general readership that were also quite different from those of the past. For example, the intent of introductions by Y. Garlan and P. Ducrey was not to provide concrete answers to practical questions, but rather to raise controversies or unexplored issues.¹³ Many of these volumes are impractical for use as general reference tools; they rather unsystematically and without a clear chronology introduce questions of booty, the fate of the vanquished, and the role of ritual in framing conflict. But implicit in their work is the idea that war is important for what it can tell us about cultural tension, class strife, or deeply embedded psychological urges among humans: the Greeks and Romans in battle, then, share practices with people of every age, and cross-cultural comparisons with pre-state Zulu or Amazon tribes can at times provide as much elucidation of ancient conflict as Herodotus or Thucydides. The use of comparative anthropology and sociology were seen as valid as earlier references by positivists to nineteenth-century European armies of the industrial state.

¹³ Ducrey (1985); Garlan (1975); Harmand (1973). Cf. the more pragmatic and systematic approach of Bohec (1994). For the expressed aims of the French school, see Garlan (1975) 20: ‘In so far as historical research is now carried out at a much deeper level, liberated from the grip of positivist and “humanist” tendencies and opened to the influence of other human sciences, the total character of contemporary wars, whether foreign or civic, has helped us to discern that ancient war has a reality, a manner of being, a practice and a mode of behaviour that are as wide as society itself. We have rediscovered the function of war on the community level, with its institutions, its rites, its ideology, representing the reactions aroused in any given society by the natural, if not permanent threat of the foreigner.’