



Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire Past Approaches, Future Prospects

By Dr. Sean Manning
 ISBN: 978-3515127752
 Franz Steiner Verlag (2021) - €74.00
www.steiner-verlag.de

Sean Manning is on a mission. He has spent several years immersed in the military history of the Achaemenid Empire and this excellent, major contribution to the literature of ancient warfare is based on his doctoral thesis. He started out (the journey is well documented on his website <http://bookandword.com>) with a feeling that “the scholarship on Achaemenid armies in English was repetitive and fell apart at the first gentle question.” His conclusion from a comprehensive review of the research and more general studies published over the past 120 years is that most scholars have been overdependent on classical literature as their main source. He traces this back to the writings of Eduard Meyer (*Geschichte des Altertums*, 1902) and observes a persistent tendency to undervalue or ignore the wealth of indigenous, non-literary sources. Where, hitherto, Persian warfare has been examined predominantly or exclusively through a Greco-Roman, western lens, Manning sets out to bring all the

different types of evidence into productive dialogue with one another.

The book weighs in at 437 pages and has seven chapters, concluding with nearly 90 pages of very thorough bibliography and indexes. In the first chapter, “A History of Research”, Manning considers the scholarship from Hans Delbrück to the present and addresses the apparent lack of progress over the past century. In the second chapter, “The Ancestors of Achaemenid Armies”, he reviews the evidence for Assyrian and Babylonian ways of war from the ninth century. Moving on to the Achaemenid era (550-323), the next two chapters, “Kings at War” and “Commoners at War”, show what can be learned respectively from royal inscriptions, and letters and other documents. “Material Remains” offers an archaeological perspective. In “Greek Literature, and the Army in Action”, the longest chapter in the book and payback for what has come before, Manning sets out the methodological challenges and problems that need to be confronted and resolved and presents his “alternative model of combat mechanics”. “Conclusions and Future Research” returns to the problems identified in the opening chapter and outlines a way forward.

One example of what can be achieved by a balanced approach to evidence - Herodotus three times describes the Persian spear as shorter than the Greek *doru*. In Aristagoras’ attempt to win Spartan support, he has him say, “...the Barbarians are not at all brave. They go into battle with bows and short spears, wearing trousers and with soft bonnets on their heads.” (5.49). Herodotus repeats this in his own voice in the epic review of Xerxes’ army (7.61) and his description of the fighting at Thermopylae (7.211). In the spirit of Meyer’s advice not to doubt the Greek authorities, there is wide consensus that the Persian spear was less than two metres long, not much taller than its bearer, discounting contradictory evidence to

be found in Achaemenid art (“Guilty as charged, your Honour!”). A range of 1.8-2.4 metres is generally agreed for the length of the *doru*, arrived at from systematic analysis of depictions in Greek art. An equivalent process applied to spears depicted in reliefs from Persepolis and Susa gives a measure for longer examples of about 2.1 metres. In this respect, the competitive advantage of Greek weaponry was significantly less than noted by Herodotus and many since.

How did this belief become established in the literary tradition in the first place? It may indeed have originated at the time of the Ionian revolt. It then perhaps lasted through the fifth century because it graphically matched a stereotype of the effete, trousered Asian, demonstrably less manly than the Greek who stood against him. There is evidence elsewhere in the *Historia* that Herodotus did not personally subscribe to this.

To sum up in Manning’s own words, “this is partially a thesis about the ancient Near East, and partially about the forces and ideologies in the last hundred years which shape how we talk about it”. His book stands as a powerful complement to Hans van Wees’ *Greek Warfare Myths and Realities* and deserves to be as accessibly priced to reach its full potential readership. The information Manning marshals and the arguments he puts forward will surely get us thinking and talking about warfare in the Achaemenid era in ways that are new and different, and likely to be refreshingly productive. So, mission accomplished! But the book is also a manifesto for the creation of a community of “researchers willing to cross disciplinary boundaries, challenge assumptions, and propose broad theories”, akin to the work being done in the well-established field of Roman Army Studies. This will take time, but after reading this volume, it is impossible to deny the need for it. **AV**

– William Shepherd