

Rance, P. and N.V. Sekunda (eds.), *Greek Taktika: Ancient Military Writing and Its Heritage: Proceedings of the International Conference on Greek Taktika held at the University of Toruń, 7-11 April 2005*. Gdańsk, 2017.<sup>1</sup>

*Greek Taktika: Ancient Military Writing and Its Heritage* publishes papers first presented at a conference at the University of Toruń in 2005. The volume focuses on those works relating to *taktika* (tactics) and *stratēgika* (generalship) and largely sets aside those military ‘handbooks’ concerned with siege-craft or artillery (12). Alongside an exceptionally thorough and useful introduction, the volume’s fifteen individual chapters (listed below) explore various philological and historical questions developed from these ancient Greek military writings.

Philip Rance’s “Introduction” offers an entry point that will readily serve readers who are not already experts in this often narrowly defined and complicated field. After summarizing Greek ‘technical’ writing on war, which appeared first around the mid-fourth century BCE during the confluence of changing social and military organizations and cultures that followed the Peloponnesian War, Rance traces the genre’s heritage and historiography. His review of the codices and philological scholarship suggests areas for further work but does not shy away from announcing that some texts leave limited potential for editorial improvements. From the historians’ perspective, Rance shows how broader trends in the academy, especially among military historians, could determine the scholarly value of these texts. Notably, the so-called ‘New Military History’ and the ‘Face of Battle’ approaches both mitigated the role that ‘technical’ texts played in historical analysis. The former, through an emphasis on the broader socio-economic aspects of war, dismissed the traditional operational frameworks, while the latter, supposedly focusing on the bloody reality of battle, ignored the idealized tactical formations inherent in military handbooks. More recently, a sort of ‘Cultural History’ has sought to illuminate the cultural milieu in which these ‘technical’ texts were written. Ultimately, Rance’s analysis of the scholarly traditions surrounding Greek military writings – which is both more nuanced and blunt than can be recapitulated here – not only provides context for the present volume, it also readily illustrates how historiographic trends, as much as the texts themselves, have determined the approaches taken with them. For this reason, it will find a happy place as a standard reading in graduate seminars on (ancient) military history.

The Table of Contents offers no thematic subsections around which the papers are organized, and regrettably there is no index through which a reader might trace themes or topics. Thankfully, then, Rance uses his “Introduction” to identify six separate sections into which the volume’s papers may be usefully divided. The first

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<sup>1</sup> The volume is available directly from the publishers ([frug@ug.edu.pl](mailto:frug@ug.edu.pl)).

identified section includes papers dealing with the origins of Greek military writings in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Burkhard Meißner suggests that Greek tactical writings could be traced back to late fifth- and early fourth-century sophistic teachings. Despite some hedging on the author's part, the conclusion that "Aeneas' writing did not evolve *ex nihilo*" (78) ought to be taken seriously, especially considering the traditions of teaching and military writing in the Greek world. Hans Michael Schellenberg examines the validity of employing Aeneas' writings as sources for ancient history, especially since Aeneas' own sources – whether from written or oral traditions, or from his own personal experiences – can often be doubted. Finally, in this section, Bogdan Burliga considers the extent to which Aeneas understood and illustrated 'tactics' in his surviving work on sieges. For Burliga, Aeneas emerges as a realist concerned with the moral ethos of a civic (amateur) army. He recognizes Aeneas' concern with organizing hoplites, or at least an infantry response of some kind, prior to a siege, and therefore reveals the importance of battlefield tactics in his text.

The volume's second section, comprising four chapters, concerns the Hellenistic traditions of tactical handbooks. Alexander Nefedkin illustrates how Asclepiodotus, Aelian and Arrian classified different types of cavalry. He also includes some discussion on modern (18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century) cavalry classifications, while wondering about their connections to these past models. Nicholas Sekunda next offers an update on his previously published work on cavalry organization.<sup>2</sup> In a second contribution, Burliga argues that some of our sources (including Asclepiodotus, Aelian, Arrian, and even Polybius) illustrate that "pushing-tactics were sometimes employed by [sarissa] phalanxes" (129). Last, and again in a second contribution, Schellenberg draws attention to later Arabic translations of Aelian's *Tactica Theoria*, and invites scholars to pursue these sources more seriously. Indeed, the field can only benefit from expanding our source base. Each of the papers in this section, to one degree or another, considers how descriptions in our sources reflect the reality of battle. Ultimately, there seems to be an opportunity to continue this line of inquiry, specifically using Greek military writings, along with other (perhaps comparative) evidence to illustrate how various challenges posed by the Greeks' opponents informed tactical changes.

A third section includes two examinations of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE writer Polyaeus. Jacek Rzepka analyzes Polyaeus' conception of the Hellenistic monarchy and finds that such individual rule rests upon personal power relationships as much as or more than constitutional structures. Slawomir Sprawski, meanwhile, offers another version of an already published paper,<sup>3</sup> in which he illustrates how Polyaeus conflated two

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<sup>2</sup> Sekunda, N. (with colour plates by A. McBride), *Seleucid and Ptolemaic Reformed Armies 168-145 BC. Vol. 1: The Seleucid Army under Antiochus Epiphanes* (Stockport 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Sprawski, Slawomir, "Alexander at Tempe (Polyaeus 4.3.21): Old Memories for 'Tourists' during the Roman Era" in S. G. Gouloulis and S. T. Sdrolia (eds.) *Ἅγιος Δημήτριος. Στομίου* (Larisa 2010) 433-44.

different Alexanders (the Great and II) while attempting to describe the king's route over Mt. Ossa to Tempe. Both of these contributions illustrate the importance of carefully considering later sources when applying them as evidence for the distant past, especially those sources written by rhetoricians whose goal was something other than history.

In the fourth section, Pierre O. Juhel and Radosław A. Gawroński consider how these Greek tactical writings might help us illuminate evidence connected to military insignia and equipment. Juhel identifies the transverse crested helmet as a marker of officers in both the Macedonian and Roman armies. Gawroński, meanwhile, attempts to identify the types of javelins used by Roman cavalry during the first and second centuries CE. Both contributions stand a bit outside the arguments presented in the other chapters, but nevertheless reflect the value of comparing these Greek tactical authors with evidence from the material record.

Wojciech Brilowski, in the volume's fifth section, first reminds readers that they must remember that rhetorical choices often conquered the need for strict accuracy. He then examines Arrian's *Acies contra Alanos* in an effort to determine the Roman army's formation against the Alans, and the commander's role in formulating that formation. His discussion appears to challenge some of the other contributions to the volume, specifically emphasizing the difficulty of using spear terminology to determine types of forces or their arrangement. He prefers, rather, to consider the individual unit histories and structural conditions to determine Arrian's battlefield organization and tactics. Rance then illustrates how Maurice's *Strategicon* can be viewed as an heir of Greek military writings, in particular Aelian's *Tactica Theoria* and Arrian's *Acies contra Alanos*. Particularly noteworthy is the identification of the powerful value these ancient texts may have had as a source of precedent in arguments with contemporary military leaders who made up Maurice's audience.

Finally, in what Rance determined to be the volume's sixth section, Keith Roberts traces the use of Classical texts in tactical doctrines of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Roberts argues that most European militaries during this time period, while cognizant of the ancient idealizations of war, saw their own systems – best illustrated by the Spanish army – as perfectly effective. The Dutch, led by Maurice of Nassau, developed a dominant military system by combining ancient and contemporary examples of war. The chapter is a useful and interesting introduction into the role ancient ideals, as filtered through texts, played in the development of pre-modern militaries. Finally, Richard Brzezinski, in a ranging contribution considers classical inheritances in Polish culture from the 15<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. He ultimately reveals how societies can choose and reinforce cultural traditions for their own political considerations.

For specialists of individual topics and authors, these papers should repay results. Those interested in ancient warfare, but not experts in the intricacies of these texts, will find beneficial introductions into this sub-field. Scholars interested in the

meaning of the genre, and indeed the consequences of that genre on the nature of warfare in the ancient world and beyond, will find that there is work still to be done. That is not a criticism of this volume, only an observation that our knowledge of ancient warfare, especially the varying martial cultures of the societies that traded hegemony over the Mediterranean world, will benefit from the continued investigation of these Greek military writings.

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