

Steele Brand, *Killing for the Republic: citizen-soldiers and the Roman way of war.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019. xix, 370 p. \$34.95. ISBN 9781421429861.

I found this volume difficult to review, as it defies being placed into a single category – something which, I think it is clear, the author actually intends. Considered as an academic text in the modern discipline of Roman military history, this book ranges from “reasonably solid, if somewhat conservative” to (perhaps uncharitably) “a bit superficial” – although that might be expected of a volume trying to cover eight centuries of military and political history in only 326 pages. In short though, while scholars interested in exploring the actual details of Republican military history will find a very readable narrative, they will also find nothing particularly new in this book – and indeed quite a bit that is outdated (or at least no longer in fashion, generally for good reason). The narrative available here can also be found (arguably in a much more complete and rigorous form) in works like Goldsworthy’s 2003 *The Complete Roman Army*, and it does not include or engage with any of the more recent developments in the field (e.g. the rejection of the Roman ‘hoplite phalanx’ and ‘Marian reforms’, etc.). However, it is clear from the opening pages that this book was not written to be read only, or even primarily, as part of the modern academic discipline of Roman military history – despite being published by an academic press. The book is also an explicit piece of political commentary on modern America, and its success and position in that area it is far harder to place.

As the glowing endorsement from Victor Davis Hanson on the back cover would likely indicate to anyone aware of his work and politics (not to mention the book’s promotion by entities like ‘The American Conservative’ and the ‘Jack Miller Center’), the political stance espoused by Brand in this volume could also be described, like its take on the historical narrative, as “somewhat conservative”. The book not only explicitly engages with modern American politics, it argues for a specific social, cultural, and political position, calling for a return to the ‘traditional values’ of the American Republic, as established by the US founding fathers, for which the Roman Republic served as a model. Indeed, rather than serving as the primary focus, as is typically the case with academic works, the ancient world is largely relegated to a secondary consideration in this volume – effectively deployed as an *exemplum* by Brand to address an issue he has identified in contemporary American society. As he wrote in a 9 September 2019 blog post:

Roman citizens cared too much about war, but Americans care too little. Apathy is just as dangerous as blind patriotism. A consequence of extremely low military participation is a growing divide between the civilian and the soldier. Recent election cycles cite issues ranging from healthcare, the economy, the environment, and immigration. The ongoing war on terror is something many Americans rarely consider these days. Apathy about military matters is not healthy for a republic – it results in sacrifices from

too few and inhibits the citizenry's oversight of the state's coercive power. Roman emperors knew this, which is why the first emperor turned Rome's citizen-soldiers into professional armies loyal to him alone. I wrote *Killing for the Republic* because I hoped to make a historical argument for why citizens should care about their republic. I wanted to explain how republics fought wars, why Roman citizen-soldiers were particularly good at it, and what insights this still has for us.¹

Brand's goal is further explained in the book's conclusion, where he notes:

They argue that there is such a thing as a 'Western way of war'. In some ways, they may be right, but I have attempted to explain how we should instead see Western ways of war. Rome relied on a different civic ethos to fight its wars on the other side of the divide that separated the republic from the principate. In the same way, modern nations change from one way of war to another... A citizenry's preference for participatory or professional soldiery says more about its willingness to participate than its desire for proficient killers. So when the modern republic engages in warfare, our increasing preference for professional over participatory armies reveals an ethos entirely different from that of the Roman Republic and from that of our own past. If the way we fight wars has changed, if the price of civic participation is so much cheaper, and if life and death are no longer on the line, then the way we understand peace has changed as well (p. 322).

It is therefore clear that Brand sees in the Roman Republic a model which modern America should emulate, or at least learn from.

Brand's position and argument are therefore provocative – and intentionally so. However, the way in which he constructs them in this volume was more than a little frustrating – at least for this reader. Most notably, Brand's models of Rome's Republican social, political, and military systems, although generally supported by snippets pulled from various ancient authorities (nearly always literary – archaeology is almost entirely absent from this volume), seem to be crafted in order to create the most straightforward narrative possible, with the clearest linkages with modern American society and history. He does not seem to be interested in critically analyzing the evidence, but rather is working quickly to create his *exemplum* and move on to his central point. Consequently, Brand generally adopts a very optimistic approach to the overt narrative offered by the ancient literary sources, even for Rome's problematic early history, largely side-stepping the myriad debates and issues which feature in modern scholarship. For instance, he accepts that by the start of the fifth century BC Rome was a "capable city-state" with a "communal army of citizens"

¹ "What Happened to the American Citizen-Soldier? A Former US Army Intelligence Officer's Lessons from the Roman Republic" 9 September 2019 (<https://lithub.com/what-happened-to-the-american-citizen-soldier/>). Accessed 13 March 2020.

which was “slowly carving up its opponents” (p. 84) – a position which even the more optimistic of early Roman historians might blanch at. As a result, the book’s core argument is based on a very traditional model of Roman Republican politics and warfare which would have offered few surprises to America’s 18th century founding fathers had they read it, and indeed that is likely the point. This book was not written with an eye to unpicking ‘what actually happened’ in Republican Rome or investigating the nuances of the Roman military system. Instead, it uses a ‘broad strokes’ model of the Roman Republic as a point of reference to compare and explore modern American politics. On one level, this is fine, and indeed understandable. Although it prompts the question, what are the implications if this ‘broad strokes’ model of Republican Rome is fundamentally flawed? This is not an idle question, as there is an increasing push against the overt literary narrative for Roman Republican warfare by many in the field (e.g. Drogula, Terrenato, Cadiou, Gauthier, and indeed the present reviewer to name but a few). One wonders, for instance, how Brand’s model of a Rome driven by ‘civic militarism’ would account for Terrenato’s ‘grand elite negotiation’. And further, this reader often found that the ‘broad strokes’ model being offered missed many vital aspects which arguably undercut the entire exercise – for instance the implications of Rome’s evolving and expanding citizenship and the importance of all the other connections (family, patronage, religious, economic, etc.) which also shaped Roman life and identity.

Perhaps the best way to summarize this volume then is to suggest that in it, Brand is attempting to be Polybius. Not study Polybius, but in many ways channel Polybius, as well as his goals and methods. As he lays out in his preface (which—and I suspect consciously—mimics Polybius’ own introduction), the book is an exploration of how Rome was able to conquer the Mediterranean. And in answer to this question, Brand (like Polybius) attributes the Romans’ success to the unique character of the Roman people and their constitution – and particularly the state’s use of ‘citizen/farmer/soldiers’ and the militarization of her society (e.g. “This book answers these questions by describing how Roman farmers were transformed into ambitious killers. Like many expansionist states throughout history, Rome instilled something violent and vicious in its soldiers, making them more effective than their opponents” (p. x); “Rome may have fielded citizen-soldiers, but these citizens were part of a militarized society – a ‘martial republic’ – that habituated its citizens to kill” p. 213). Additionally, like Polybius, Brand’s goal is only partly historical. Brand is also seeking to shape and influence the current generation by arguing that Rome’s model can also be applied to modern American society (as he notes on p. xvii “Each chapter opens by referencing how the stages in Rome’s republican life cycle are relevant today”). However, also like Polybius, Brand does not always seem to be bound by the same rules and conventions as modern ancient historians – or at least not the same extent. The ancient narrative is there to be used, not interrogated, and it is largely subservient to the wider point which he is making about modern society.

In sum then, *Killing for the Republic* is an interesting book on several levels. It is generally well-written, with a fluid and readable style. It is also provocative and consciously targeted at a modern audience (including an ‘educated general reader’). However, it is also frustrating for an ancient historian (or at least this ancient historian), in the same way that watching a movie set in ancient Rome often is – I found myself focusing on which bits Brand ‘got right’ and annoyed by the aspects he ‘got wrong’, quickly glossed over, or oversimplified. While I might have ignored many of these in an Op-Ed (which is probably how I would ultimately categorize this piece overall), I found it difficult to accept that the evidence and historical narrative was subservient to another purpose, particularly in a volume published by an academic press. And as for its central, political argument, in today’s highly polarized times, I suspect its success will depend quite a bit on the reader’s political stance coming in. It will, however, likely serve (for better or worse) as a useful example of the deployment of ancient models in modern political debates.

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