

Sean Manning, *Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire: Past Approaches, Future Prospects*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021. Pp. 437, 8 b/w ill, 4 b/w tables. ISBN 9783515127752. EUR 74.00.

“Achaemenid military history has often been studied, but rarely for its own sake” (21).

Sean Manning opens his monograph with this sentence, and by implication one might expect that he intends *Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire* to remedy this gap in the scholarship. Yet that is not quite the case; the opening statement is more thesis than observation, hence the subtitle *Past Approaches, Future Prospects*. Rather than a synthetic investigation of Achaemenid military organization and practice, Manning aims to demonstrate the lack of reflection “about the general direction of research and various methods and assumptions” (21) within its historiography and to offer resources and case studies to guide future research.

In Chapter 1, “A History of Research,” Manning surveys scholarship on the Achaemenid military up to 2018. He argues that the bulk of recent work merely repeats or reinterprets the Greek and Latin sources, marking little change from the first studies of the Persian military by Hans Delbrück and Eduard Meyer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Chapter 2, “The Ancestors of Achaemenid Armies,” reviews the historiography and evidence available for earlier Mesopotamian armed forces, particularly the Neo-Assyrians.

Manning then turns to the Persians and the Near Eastern evidence. Chapter 3, “Kings at War: The Perspective of the Royal Inscriptions,” analyzes Persian warfare and ideology in the Cyrus Cylinder and Behistun inscription. Chapter 4, “Commoners at War: the Perspective of Letters and Documents,” surveys the types of administrative and non-propaganda documents available on the Persian military, summarizes the different types of troops conscripted by the Persians, from specialized estate holders to foreign mercenaries, and reviews the evidence for how Persian armies were equipped, mustered, and supplied. Chapter 5, “Material Remains: The Perspective of Archaeology,” introduces the largely unpublished, inaccessible, or understudied material evidence available on the Achaemenid military.

In Chapter 6, “Greek Literature, and the Army in Action,” Manning confronts the Greek and Latin sources. After identifying some of the methodological challenges they pose, he critiques previous scholarship’s reliance upon them and attempts to model a better approach through a series of case studies on select topics like the size and composition of the military. Chapter 7, “Conclusion and Future Research,” summarizes the previous chapters and concludes with a call for the creation of a “new synthesis of the role of armed force in the Teispid-Achaemenid empire” (357) through interdisciplinary collaborations modeled on the Achaemenid History Workshops of the 80s and 90s and Roman Army Studies today.

This book makes an important contribution to the existing scholarship on Achaemenid warfare on the basis of Chapter 4 alone. Researchers approaching the topic from the ancient Greek world will find its review of Near Eastern sources valuable, and the summary of Achaemenid military manpower and organization should become standard reference material. Although Chapter 5's survey of the archaeological evidence does not yield as many insights, this is more due to the state of the sources than any fault of Manning. Even so, the chapter will prove useful simply by introducing researchers to sources and scholarship on Achaemenid warfare that they might otherwise have overlooked.

Unfortunately, elsewhere the book is less successful. Chapter 1's historiographical survey is a bit long and, while Manning is correct that too much contemporary scholarship merely repeats Greek and Latin sources on Persia, his discussion caricatures, downplays, or ignores a growing body of publications that is more critical (an issue that returns in Chapter 6). The chapter concludes with the promising claim that the book will situate the Achaemenid military within the context of earlier Near Eastern and later Hellenistic armies, but discussion of the Hellenistic period is largely absent from what follows.

The Near Eastern predecessors of the Achaemenid military are the subject of Chapter 2. However, here Manning avoids identifying ways that the Persians sustained and adapted earlier traditions, tactics, infrastructure, and so on. Instead, the chapter consists of a meandering summary of scholarship on many topics related to the Neo-Assyrian armed forces in which the Achaemenids are hardly mentioned and which later chapters rarely reference. For instance, the lengthy analysis of the Cyrus Cylinder and Behistun inscription in Chapter 3 devotes little space to discussion of their relationship to the large body of extant Neo-Assyrian imperial propaganda inscriptions. This chapter offers few new insights, and Manning's concluding remarks on Achaemenid imperial ideology and its failure to explain Persian aggression toward Greece are unpersuasive.¹

The weakest part of the book is the discussion of Greek and Latin sources and historiography in Chapter 6. Manning's treatment of scholars who rely on these sources for Achaemenid warfare is often facile and at times overly critical. They are characterized as either indiscriminating copyists or rationalizing euhemerists whose (uncited, unidentified, undescribed) "thoughtful arguments" for preferring sources like Xenophon over Diodorus are dismissed for not considering the implausibility "that in every case the best and wordiest writer was also the best researcher" (268). This approach is perhaps counterproductive to the fostering of interdisciplinary collaboration that the book seeks to provoke.

¹ Readers would do better to consult John Hyland's (unreferenced by Manning) recent monograph, *Persian Interventions: The Achaemenid Empire, Athens, & Sparta, 450-386 BCE* (Baltimore 2018).

Specialists in ancient Greek history are not likely to find Manning's own attempts to model a better method to these Greek and Latin sources productive. Despite criticizing current Greek military scholarship for failing to engage with the few existing catalogues of archaeological, artistic, and Near Eastern documentary evidence for Persian warfare (50, 54, 159), Manning never explains what such engagement might entail and does not use any of his case studies to illustrate it.² Instead, these studies focus on subjects like the scythed chariot, for which there is no evidence outside of Greek and Latin sources, or simply do not utilize the complementary material available, e.g., the discussion of Persian siege warfare in Chapter 6 does not incorporate relevant archaeological evidence introduced in Chapter 5. Likewise, contextual evidence from documentary sources from within the empire covered in Chapter 4 could have been utilized to shed new light on the Immortals, but Manning avoids a case study on this popular subject – citing a lack of direct evidence (345) – even as elsewhere he criticizes previous work for its credulous reliance on Herodotus (50).

These shortcomings do not cancel the very real contributions made by *Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire*. Manning's survey of textual and material evidence related to warfare from within the empire represents a significant step toward addressing a serious shortcoming in current scholarship. Some may find the lengthy surveys of the historiography of Achaemenid warfare in Chapter 1 and Neo-Assyrian warfare in Chapter 2 useful introductions to their respective topics. And while the treatment of Greek and Latin historiography misses the mark, on that topic there is sufficient published work already available for consultation. Manning is to be commended for making difficult research and source material on the Achaemenids more accessible to scholars, and the field will benefit greatly should his future investigations continue in this direction.

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² For one possible model, see Hyland again, "The Achaemenid Messenger Service and the Ionian Revolt: New Evidence from the Persepolis Fortification Archive," *Historia* 68 (2019): 150-169.