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Peter Hunt, *Slaves, War, and Ideology in the Greek Historians*. Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1998. Pp. xiv, 246. ISBN 0521584299.

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This book is important because it corrects a long-standing misrepresentation in both ancient sources and modern historians. Peter Hunt proves that slaves were present on battlefields and in battleships more often and more plentifully than one can easily gather from Herodotus or Thucydides. Just as importantly, he explains precisely why the major ancient historians omitted or glossed over slave combatants.

Hunt culls references to slave soldiers and sailors from a range of ancient authors. For example, we know from Pausanias, a second-century AD travel writer, that slaves were granted freedom and fought alongside Athenian citizens for the first time at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BC, something completely ignored by Herodotus. Also canvassed are passing but revealing mentions in the major historians themselves: Herodotus, describing the aftermath of Thermopylae in 480, notes that Persians inspecting the battlefield mistook corpses of helots—the state-owned, serf-like slaves of the Spartans—for citizen-soldiers, inflating the number of casualties among the free Spartan and Thespian troops. The laugh is on the Persians, but also on Herodotus, who has let slip evidence of helot combatants:

The bravery of the three hundred Spartans who died under Leonidas has become a by-word for patriotic courage. That greater numbers of Helots, whom the Spartans called their “slaves,” also died defending Greece puts the noble struggle for freedom in a rather different light. (32)

This putting of things in “a rather different light” typifies Hunt’s book throughout.

Herodotus does say 35,000 light-armed ($\psi\iota\lambda\omicron\iota$) helots accompanied the 5,000 Spartiates at Plataea in 479. While modern scholars have confined these men to “support personnel” or the like,¹ Hunt promotes them to full hoplite status. He thinks they made up the seven rear ranks of the standard eight-rank phalanx, with the Spartiates in the first rank. Here I must demur: despite the neat seven-to-one ratio, these helot-hoplites are illusions. In the first place, $\psi\iota\lambda\omicron\iota$ normally designates archers or slingers, never “hoplites.” Nor will it do to imagine “light-armed hoplites”: at a minimum, they will have needed a helmet, shield, and thrusting spear—that is, 35,000 helmets, shields, and spears in all. Anything less would have made the phalanx fatally soft once the thin red line at the front was breached or even hard-pressed. It strains credulity to imagine Sparta or the other allied *poleis* together possessed such a surplus of expensive armor. Moreover, general logistical considerations make Herodotus’s numbers for Spartan forces (50,000) and for the Greek

¹ E.g., N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece to 322 B.C.*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1986) 247, speaks of “skirmishers,” Raphael Sealey, *A History of the Greek City-States, ca. 700–338 B.C.* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1976) 223, of “servicing troops.”

army as a whole (110,000) wildly implausible.² To cite only one exigency: such a force would have required at least 110 tons of grain per day, apart from the feed and fodder for horses and pack animals. All this said, Hunt is right to underscore the participation of a large number of helots in some capacity during combat at Plataea:

Plataea is a case where Herodotus is explicit ... that the Helots fought in the battle.... Modern scholars with few exceptions either dismiss the Helots from the battle altogether, put them in the supply train, or merely state that they were unimportant, light armed soldiers Herodotus most definitely places the Helots on the battlefield, but modern scholars minimize their role. (45)

He is able to cite a surprising number of other instances of battle participation by helots or *neodamodeis* (helots freed expressly for military service).

Although Thucydides, too, minimizes or excludes slave soldiers in his history, he does hint at the effect of desertion of slave labor on both sides in the Peloponnesian War. Indeed, as we know from other sources, the encouragement of slave desertion, often by the promise of freedom, was a deliberate strategy during the war. The Athenians adopted it after their fortification of Pylos in the Peloponnese in 425, and the Spartans returned the favor after establishing a permanent base at Decelea in Attica in 413. Though Thucydides notes that the Spartans depleted the Athenian work force by 20,000 men, undoubtedly inflicting severe economic strain on the city-state in wartime, “he is brief and conceals the active role that the antagonists took in encouraging slaves to desert or rebel” (115), an indication of the offensiveness of a policy that flouted the ingrained ideology of free vs. unfree.

Xenophon’s experience was different. He actually served in fourth-century armies, like that of Agesilaus, with sizeable contingents of slave combatants. He even endorses the use of slaves in both army and navy to forestall invasion of Attica. He also tells of the Athenians’ commandeering of slaves from the Laurion mines to serve in the fleet that defeated Spartan forces at the battle of the Arginusae Islands in 406.³

Emerging from Hunt’s convincing, well-documented demonstration of the military and economic value of slaves in Greek warfare is a glaring contradiction:

Practices such as recruiting slaves or Helots for the army were contrary to Greek ideology; they occurred nevertheless. When the sources talk about such unsavory—to ancient slave-owning eyes—methods, the information has already slipped through the screen of an ancient ideology which would rather not see it. We should not make the mistake of adding a second screen and discounting attested practices on the grounds that they were not consonant with ancient ideology. This dissonance between practice and ideology needs to be explored, not eliminated by disregard of known practices. (175)

² For comparison, Alexander the Great embarked on his campaign against Persia with an army of 48,000 combatants. On army size and concomitant logistical issues, see Hans Delbrück, *Warfare in Antiquity*, trans. W.J. Renfroe, vol. 1 (Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1975 [orig. 1920]) 111–120 and especially Donald W. Engels’ invaluable *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1978).

³ Hunt rightly stresses the prominence of slave-rowers in the Athenian armada: “our sources make it clear that, at least during the Peloponnesian War, a portion—perhaps something like the 20–40% of IG I3 1032—of the crews of Athenian triremes consisted of slaves” (88).

The explication of the Greek ideology of slavery, as much as his corrective reassessment of slave soldiers and sailors, is at the heart of Hunt's book. The Greeks attempted to justify the institution of slavery by a kind of spurious anthropology that classified slaves as essentially inferior to free persons—in Aristotle's famous formulation (*Politics* 1253b–1254b) “property with souls” and “living tools,” different *by nature* from the free. Enslaved captives of war had, the Greeks maintained, shown their true natures by having lost in battle. This centuries-old bias was sorely tested by accumulating instances of free Athenians suffering enslavement (as at Syracuse in 413) and of slaves serving competently on battlefields and aboard triremes. Nonetheless, Herodotus and Thucydides could dissemble the fact of slave combatants because their contemporary audiences would never complain, for the prevailing ideology secured free citizens a cherished sense of individual and civic value. Hunt also suggests that upper-class citizens adapted the same ideology to distance themselves from the working classes, both free and unfree.

The ideal of the freedom-loving city-state glorified in Pericles' Funeral Speech (Thuc. 2.35–46) is a hoary historiographical topos. It has been exploded in the past half century or so by a hardnosed scholarly audit of the social and political balance sheets of imperial Athens and militaristic Sparta. Peter Hunt furthers that larger enterprise by giving slaves their due in the annals of ancient Greek warfare and cautioning against uncritical reading of biased sources, however classic they may be.