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Harry Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004. Pp. xxii, 165. ISBN 978-0-19-280470-9.

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If the very short introduction promised in this meaty little book's subtitle were all that its author accomplished in surveying ancient (scil., Greek and Roman) warfare, that would be a most welcome and valuable thing. But Sidebottom (Lincoln College, Oxford) provides a great deal more, in particular a nuanced exercise in intellectual history and a judicious corrective to entrenched notions about western warfare:¹ "it is best for us to interpret the 'Western Way of War' more as an ideology than an objective reality.... The book looks at both how war was done and, the far less studied topic, how war was thought about" (xiii).

In Chapter 1, "At My Signal Unleash Hell': the Western Way of War?" (1-15), Sidebottom shrewdly draws on the opening battle scene in Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* (2000), far the best of a spate of "sword and sandal" films in the past decade or so. Here we find many venerable stereotypes: on the one side, the disciplined Roman legionaries in their orderly ranks and regulation armor, deploying standardized weaponry and advanced technology, moving smartly at the commands of a hierarchy of officers; on the other, the motley crew of savage Germans, individually fearsome in aspect, but ill-organized and undisciplined—a mob of barbarians screaming incoherently and wielding an *ad hoc* array of weapons. The chapter then delineates the sources of this familiar "cultural construction" of the western way of war. The Greeks of the classical era attributed their surprising victory over the Persians (499-479 B.C.) to the superiority of their governmental systems and their military preparation and tactics as contrasted with those of the barbarians: "The Greeks fight for freedom. They seek open battle, which they will fight hand to hand, and win because of their training and courage. The servile Persians fight at the command of an autocrat. They are effeminate cowards, because as bowmen they seek to avoid close combat, and as horsemen they are quick to run away" (7). Similarly, the Romans cast the Carthaginians as products of an inferior culture, a race of traders, greedy and treacherous, given to rank superstition extending to human sacrifice. "Carthage was feminized.... Carthaginian men ... [wore] loose, unbelted clothes, and lacked control of their sexual appetites" (9). That the Carthaginians sought and won devastating "western style" pitched battles against the Romans was explained away by claiming they had relied on non-Carthaginian allies and the cunning (not courage or genius) of Hannibal. The chapter neatly sets out the archetypal givens of the western ideology of war as a backdrop for the analyses in the rest of the book.

Chapter 2, "Thinking with War" (16-34), describes how, for Greeks and Romans, war—its imagery, lexicon, and history—permeated their literature and art, shaping their thought even in fields well outside the strictly military. Sidebottom sketches the prevailing ethnographic typecasting of non-western "others": "small, decadent, clever, cowardly" eastern-

¹ See esp. Victor D. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1998; orig. 1988).

ers; “big, primitive, stupid, and ... ferocious” northerners, be they *Brittunculi* (“wretched/little Britons”), Gauls, or Germans; and nomadic peoples to the north, east, and south (Huns, Arabs, Moors, et al.), “lacking agriculture and houses, let alone cities ..., [and] considered the polar opposite of Greek and Roman culture” (21). He also shows that many gender stereotypes derived from the linkage—in the west—between war and masculinity, in sharp contrast to barbarian Amazons and “a succession of frightening, but perversely attractive foreign warrior queens” (25) like Artemisia, Olympias, Cleopatra, Boudicca, and Zenobia. The chapter concludes with a look at three distinctly non-martial groups—Roman love poets, Greek philosophers, and Christians—which “nevertheless constructed their personalities ... in terms of war” (28).

Chapter 3, “War and Society” (35–52), examines both traditional and revisionist positions regarding three cases of the effect (or perceived effect) of war-making upon society: the “hoplite revolution” during the Archaic era in Greece; the “agrarian crisis” of the last two centuries of Republican Rome; and the “barbarization” of the Roman army during the late Empire. Sidebottom is studiously evenhanded in assessing the pertinent debates of scholars: “all historical interpretations are provisional and part of an ongoing process” (51). Why so? Three reasons: the discovery of new material (e.g., archaeological); shifts in intellectual fashion (e.g., vis-à-vis Marxism); and the desire of new generations of scholars to make advances in scholarship (and, frankly, to secure jobs) by questioning the dominant interpretations of their elders.

Chapter 4, “Thinking about War” (53–64), surveys major thinkers of the ancient world in the conviction that “their ideas on the causes of war, its justifications, and its acceptable limits ... not only tell us about the past, but can inform modern discussions and attitudes” (53). Herodotus and Thucydides, though they commented on the specific causes of specific wars and, in the case of the latter, famously discriminated between ostensible or expressed and the “truest” motivations, did not espouse any overarching theory about the morality of war in general. Plato and Aristotle propound unprogressive doctrines about the legitimacy of war against others (i.e., barbarians), who were by definition deserving of enslavement, and the concomitant illegitimacy of wars of Greeks against Greeks, save in the (extremely frequent) cases where security, honor, or the avenging of a wrong was at issue. Sidebottom also discusses attitudes toward civil strife (e.g., democrats vs. oligarchs on Corcyra in Thucydides; the Catilinarian conspiracy in Cicero and Sallust) and the assertion by Greek philosophers and Christian writers in Imperial Rome that war was either altogether unjustifiable (Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus) or righteous only when required to bring peace or to correct men’s morals (Augustine).

In Chapter 5, “Strategy” (65–81), begins with the grand strategies of conquest attributed in ancient times to men like Alcibiades, Alexander, and Julius Caesar or, on the barbarian side, Mithridates and Ardashir. Modern scholars usually dismiss these as fantastic, but Sidebottom cautions that, given the deficiencies of geographic knowledge and cartography in ancient times, “big plans of conquest, in a small world comprised of inferior peoples [see chap. 1] ... could seem far more achievable to the ancients than they do to our eyes” (69). Turning to Edward Luttwak’s well-known arguments about the “grand strategy” of the Roman Empire,² Sidebottom registers major objections to it, especially the fact that

² *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1976).

the Romans appear to have lacked both the mental outlook and foreign policy apparatus requisite for so sophisticated a strategic plan prosecuted over several centuries. The chapter closes with a most salutary seven-page discussion of logistics, a far too often neglected topic in histories of war-waging, whether ancient or modern.

Chapter 6, “Fighting” (82–III), offers a good, sound Keeganesque³ description of “the physical and emotional experiences of the ordinary combatant” (82), including the classical Greek hoplite, the Macedonian phalangite, and the Roman legionary. Also examined are the conditions of cavalry fighting, the conduct of sieges, and naval warfare. Sidebottom then analyzes the destruction of a legion and five cohorts at the battle of Atuatuca (sometimes spelled “Aduatuca”) and its aftermath as recounted in Caesar’s *Bellum Gallicum*. He stresses the importance of logistics and failure of leadership, with its consequent ill effects upon morale. This in turn leads to a broader discussion of generalship in Greek and Roman warfare, especially its gradual evolution from heroic, Homeric-style participatory leadership in battle to the supervisory and exhortatory functions of commanders as “battle managers.” “The ‘symbolic’ aspect of the general’s role was always appropriate, whether in theory or practice, and if things were going well or badly.... The ‘battle management’ of the classical commander was as much, if not more, about motivating his men as about tactical finesse” (III).

As suggested by its title, “‘People Should Know When They Are Conquered’: The Reinventions of the Western Way of War” (112–128), the book’s seventh and last chapter returns to *Gladiator*. Sidebottom compares the popular cinematic realization of warfare between Romans and barbarians with that found in the sculptural program of the Column of Marcus Aurelius, erected by Commodus to commemorate his father’s wars against Germans and Sarmatians between A.D. 172 and 175. With the aid of eight illustrations of the Column, he ingeniously identifies similarities and, more often, differences between the two depictions of the waging of war. This leads on to a concluding discussion of ongoing refinements in our understanding of the western way of war. As Sidebottom points out, scholars like John Lynn⁴ have shown that “for long periods of time, very few of the ideas that make up the concept ... have been present in the reality of western European war-making” (126). Victor Hanson’s provocative expansion of his original formulation of the idea beyond Greek and Roman antiquity⁵ has met with convincing demurrals and corrections. The special contribution of this book is its insistence that the theory of a western way is a “long-lived, highly adaptable, and powerful ideology” (128) rather than an objective representation of the realities of warfare.

As if all this were not enough, *Ancient Warfare* is equipped with a twenty-two-page, expertly annotated guide to “Further Reading,” a breathless “Chronology” (ca. four millennia on four pages), five minimalist maps, eighteen black and white illustrations, and a good index. All in all, a lot of bang for the drachma (or denarius).⁶

Sidebottom is to be congratulated on a lively, discerning, crisp overview of the historical conditions and intellectual constructions of ancient warfare.

³ See esp. John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (NY: Viking, 1976; rev. ed. with illus. 1989).

⁴ See *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Boulder, CO: Westview Pr, 2003).

⁵ In, e.g., *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (NY: Doubleday, 2001).

⁶ Or dollar: list price \$9.95.