



The Army of Ptolemaic Egypt, 323 to 204 BC: An Institutional and Operational History by Paul Johstono.

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Of all of the successor regimes that arose after the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC), the Ptolemaic dynasty, centered in Egypt, endured the longest, only snuffed out in 30 BC after Cleopatra VII picked the wrong side in the last great Roman civil war. In the third century BC, Ptolemy II ruled the strongest and most stable of the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Eastern Mediterranean, thanks chiefly to its large and effective army. In his new book, historian Paul Johstono (Air Command and Staff College) provides a most welcome operational and institutional history of that army.¹

Johstono begins with a dramatic moment in Ptolemaic military history: the Battle of Raphia (217 BC), in which a massive, 75,000-strong Ptolemaic army defeated a Seleucid invasion force of 68,000 men. The ancient historian Polybius's account includes a detailed breakdown of Ptolemaic military units and their combat functions. Johstono next rewinds to the founding of the dynasty to show how the miscellaneous followers of one of Alexander's lieutenants were transformed into the massed heavy infantry and cavalry present at Raphia a century later.

Historians of Ptolemaic Egypt have the advantage of an invaluable body of primary source documents—thousands of papyrus documents preserved in Egypt's dry sands or recycled as mummy wrappings. Thus, while there is no true literary narrative of Ptolemaic military operations until Polybius in the 220s BC, the papyri give us a substantial archive of paperwork, including snippets of official records as well as private transactions involving people identified as soldiers.

Ptolemy I formally declared himself king ca. 305 BC but he effectively governed Egypt as an independent warlord after being assigned the province eighteen years earlier. He waged a complicated and brutal civil war against other Diadochi (former lieutenants of Alexander) that lasted into the 280s. Desperate for troops, he offered land to just about any taker, and even settled many POWs. Johstono argues that the military institutions of Ptolemy I were relatively haphazard, with settlements and land grants based on immediate needs. The practice of granting homesteads (kleroi) to soldiers in exchange for military service was not systematized and expanded until the reigns of his successors.

Johstono notes an odd pattern of allotments early in the reign of Ptolemy II (283-246): the papyrus records reveal far too many high-ranking officers with extremely large grants, and a scarcity of common soldiers. Johstono speculates that the early Ptolemies over-granted officers' plots as a means of building up a class of aristocratic military supporters.

That changed, however, before the Second Syrian War (260-253). In particular, massive reclamation and redistribution projects in the Fayum saw the grants of kleroi going predominantly to

1. Johstono's work is nicely complemented by Christelle Fischer-Bovet's *Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2014), which adopts a "war and society" approach, with heavier emphasis on the army's role in civil society during the second century BC.

infantrymen (getting around 25 arouras), while more standard cavalry land grants of around 100 arouras (1 aroura = two-thirds of an acre) appear with greater frequency. Johstono argues against the standard narrative, asserting that land distribution occurred post-conflict in order to settle demobilized veterans and mercenaries. Rather, these settlements may in fact have been planned in anticipation of renewed conflict with the Seleucids, even if the actual outbreak of the war interrupted the process. In any case, when Ptolemy II died, he left his son Ptolemy III (r. 246-222 BC) with a sizable force of settled reservists.

The author also discusses in some detail a major peacetime function of the army: conducting long range elephant hunts far to the south along the Red Sea. This involved hundreds of men both in capturing war elephants and hunting for ivory. As the hunts pushed farther down the Red Sea coast, they extended Ptolemaic suzerainty into continental Africa over a thousand miles to the south of Alexandria. Johstono characterizes the hunts as readiness exercises, providing select officers and soldiers with needed operational and logistical experience.

While a book on the army does not typically concern naval affairs, in this case Johstono stresses that the achievement of Ptolemy II was not due to his fleet. While the Ptolemies did invest significant resources in large polyreme warships, Johstono notes that they routinely failed to defeat the cheaper vessels of the Antigonids of Macedonia, including at major engagements at Cos and Andros. This re-evaluation underestimates the critical importance of seaborne mobility and logistics in Ptolemaic operations. The Ptolemaic fleet effectively supported expeditionary forces and garrisons across the Aegean rather than playing a decisive role in its own right.

In the Third Syrian War (ca. 246-241 BC) the Ptolemaic army defeated its Seleucid rivals and marched as far as Babylon. Though our sources for the war are poor, Johstono uses papyrus records to demonstrate a substantial mobilization of military settlers, at least for the campaign of 246-45, when Ptolemy III personally led his forces into Syria and beyond. Some papyri suggest heavy casualties among settler troops, requiring the state to redistribute the land allotments of dead soldiers, generally to a son. A mysterious putative Egyptian revolt that prompted Ptolemy III to return with the bulk of his army, eventually allowing for Seleucid recovery, is mentioned in the literary sources and there is even some evidence of volcanic activity that might have had a deleterious effect on the Nile flood. The papyrus record is oddly silent on the disruptions in taxation and administration that a revolt might generate. Perhaps the revolt was abortive and quickly crushed, leaving little trace in the papyri. In any case, Ptolemy III was sufficiently spooked to rush home.

Around 235 BC, according to the papyri, there was another major program of military reform and reorganization. The goal seems to have been to regularize reserve units into functional combat formations. The old, often over-officered cavalry units were redistributed into numbered hipparchies (regiments of ca. 500 men). The proportion of officers to soldiers reflected in surviving records now corresponded to the expected ratio in a functional combat unit. The infantry were divided into numbered chiliarchies of roughly 1000 men and assigned a standardized pseudo-ethnic label ("Macedonian") regardless of their true ethnic background.

According to Polybius, at the very start of the Fourth Syrian War (221-217), the Ptolemies undertook a hasty program of military reform, replacing regimental commanders and regrouping soldiers by age and ethnicity. While there is some evidence for new hipparchs of cavalry regiments, little in the papyrus record suggests a major reorganization and Johstono suggests that Polybius may be misleading. The breakneck speed of the mobilization and training program, though it yielded a successful result at Raphia, shows the problem of trying to rapidly mobilize reserve units atrophied in peacetime, for active service. It remains possible, in my view, that Polybius—

who may have used a source produced within the Ptolemaic court—may be imperfectly describing some ad hoc shuffles unattested in the extant papyri.

A leitmotif of the book is the mobilization of native Egyptians, who were deployed in sizable numbers from the start. Ptolemy I followed Alexander's example in training Egyptian boys as Macedonian-style pages (earning the pseudo-ethnic title "Persian"); in due course, they matured and were assigned military duties. The Egyptian warrior aristocracy, the *machimoi*, also carried out police and paramilitary duties, while many Egyptians served in the fleet as rowers and marines. The deployment of an Egyptian heavy phalanx at Raphia, therefore, was less an innovation than an intensification of the scale and scope of past practice, although equipping, drilling, and organizing twenty thousand Egyptian recruits to fight as heavy Macedonian-style pikemen prior to Raphia was a novel development. At least some of these troops reportedly played a key role in the subsequent Egyptian revolt in the Thebaid, although Johstono, looking ahead, notes that the incorporation of Egyptians into the main army became more typical over the second century.

The book ends in 204 BC with the death of Ptolemy IV, and before the massive setbacks of the Fifth Syrian War, including a catastrophic defeat at Paneion (ca. 200 BC), pummeled both the army and the dynasty. Johstono's glimpses into second-century developments in his conclusion makes one hope a second volume is in the works. In any case, *The Army of Ptolemaic Egypt, 323 to 204 BC* makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the Ptolemaic state apparatus and Hellenistic warfare more broadly.