

REVIEW

THE ROMAN ARMY AT WAR IN THE SECOND CENTURY CE

Duncan B. Campbell, *Deploying a Roman Army: The Ektaxis kat'Alanōn of Arrian*. Glasgow: Quirinus Editions, 2022. Pp. xiv + 214. Paperback, £15.99. ISBN 979-8-8038-6862-0.

In February 2023, the world-renowned polymath Elon Musk made a bold historical statement on (where else?) Twitter: ‘The main reason Rome won was because they had the best engineering’. While experts immediately pounced to explain the significantly more complex reasons for the successes of the Roman state in acquiring and retaining its large empire, Mr Musk should be given credit for one thing: the question that his answer presupposes is one that had occupied the attention of both the Romans and their various Mediterranean neighbours.

Just how exactly did the Roman military machine become as successful as it was in various periods of its existence? This question occupied, we know, Polybius, whose survey of the rise of Roman imperialism was dedicated to exploring it. In his nearly twenty years as a very highly privileged hostage in Rome in the mid-second century BCE, he wrote about such keys to the Roman army’s success as Rome’s superior form of government (Republic is great!), and the Romans’ impressive camp constructed nightly when on the march.

But if we are truly interested in the reasons for Roman military success, we must go a step further than either Mr Musk or even Polybius, and consider a more direct question: just how did the Romans fight? After all, we know that they kept winning, but in some periods, we are not sure exactly what they did to achieve these successes. Cue military manuals.

The genre of military manuals has finally been receiving more well-deserved attention of late. One could name, for example, the superb recent collection co-edited by James Chlup and Conor Whately.¹ Whately is now editing a sequel of sorts on Byzantine and Medieval military manuals. In conjunction with these studies that emphasise the importance of manuals as sources for ancient military, social, and cultural history, it is wonderful to see

¹ J. Chlup and C. Whately, *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History* (London, 2021).

the publication of more of the manuals themselves, especially with commentary resources, so essential for reading these densely information-packed texts.² And it is to this latter category that Duncan Campbell's present volume under review belongs.

While I have read many ancient military manuals, and am not unfamiliar with Arrian, I confess that prior to this volume, I had not read this particular treatise of Arrian's. Gentle reader, I am certain that I am not alone; you are very likely with me. As with other similar works, the lack of a good translation and, more important, lack of a thorough commentary, has previously made such works less accessible to most readers.

This particular treatise is quite brief—both the Greek text and the translation, arranged on facing pages, take up only twenty pages total! The bulk of the volume, therefore, is reserved to a masterful 130-page commentary essay, sandwiched between two very helpful diagrams of the army on the march and deployed for battle order, and a comprehensive glossary of all the key terms.

In his foreword to this volume, J. E. Lendon (my own much beloved first professor of ancient military history!), boldly states the significance of this work and the need for this translation and commentary: 'Arrian's *Deployment Against the Alans* is the most important written work about how the Roman army fought in the second century AD. And if we accept recent scholars' doubts about the accuracy of the representations on Trajan's Column ... it may be the single most important work in any medium about Roman warfare in that era' (vii). Lendon is not one to exaggerate, and I fully agree here.

What makes Arrian's analysis in this treatise particularly valuable for historians is the writer's informed perspective: as the governor of Cappadocia, Arrian had to lead the defence of his province. This means that unlike some ancient military manuals that were written by armchair scholars with no real field expertise (I'm looking at you, Onasander!), this one was written by someone who was writing what he (presumably) really knew and experienced.³

The treatise and the commentary fall into three parts—a great Roman rhetorical model, of course, but also logical in this case. I will address each one in brief now. Chapters 1–10 (and the commentary on them) address the order of the army on march. The challenge here, we learn, was one of arranging multiple military units of different sorts, sizes, and fighting styles into a logical

² For a superb example with commentary, see D. Whitehead, *Aineias the Tactician: How to Survive under Siege* (Oxford, 1990) on Aeneas Tacticus. An excellent translation of three Byzantine manuals with some notes, albeit without a full-scale commentary, is G. T. Dennis, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, D.C., 1985).

³ I looked at these armchair historians and their civilian readers in N. Williams, 'The Blind Leading the Blind? Civilian Writers and Audiences of Military Manuals in the Roman World', in Chlup and Whately (n. 1) 55–77.

and effective marching formation. The task was presumably one of art as well as a science, and likely also up to the judgement of the commander—in this case Arrian himself. Campbell mentions the significance of Arrian's decision to employ a vanguard just of cavalry, instead of including light infantry and possibly some archers, as Vespasian had done in the Jewish War. This suggests a different set of circumstances, perhaps a much faster and shorter time of marching (60).

We find, in the listing of the marching orders, quite a mixture of units, and Campbell helpfully provides a survey of literary and epigraphic evidence that we have for each. As a result, the commentary on Chapter 1 of the treatise is longer than the entire text and translation of the treatise combined. But to have all of this information in one place is a fantastic resource, and while no other chapter merits quite this level of detail in the commentary, this is a good example of the depth of research that Campbell provides.

Chapters 11–24 proceed to the deployment of the army for battle once it reaches its destination. It is clear that Arrian had a very specific place in mind for the battle, one in which he would not be surrounded by the enemy. Campbell notes that his arrangement of troops for battle is somewhat peculiar, as he places archers, for instance, behind the infantry, whom he arranges in the front of all other troops, eight deep. As for cavalry, they are just held in reserve in the very back.

Finally, the culminating section, Chapters 25–31, provides the battle plan. That plan at last makes sense of the formation for battle that Arrian explained in the previous section. In particular, it turns out that the role of the cavalry, who are hanging out in the back during the battle, is solely for pursuit of the enemy afterwards. In other words, while in some periods of ancient warfare there was little interest in pursuing the enemy once they broke rank, and all focus was simply on winning on the battlefield, in this case, the focus is on defeating the enemy decisively. This means treating the events on the battlefield as only the first part of the operation. It is off the battlefield, in pursuing the nimble Alans and defeating them before they can get away to regroup for another battle, that the Romans can really achieve a decisive victory. While we cannot conclude from this (and Campbell doesn't either) that all second-century armies fought this way, what we see is Arrian's understanding of the type of enemy that he faced, and how to make the best use of his own forces in defeating this enemy decisively.

Overall, Campbell has produced a supremely well-researched yet also highly readable resource that any Roman military history fans, academic and armchair hobbyists alike, will enjoy.