
Sean Manning, *Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire. Past Approaches, Future Prospects*, Stuttgart, Steiner Verlag, 2021, 437 pp. [ISBN 9783515127752].

Born from the reworking of his doctoral thesis (submitted at the University of Innsbruck), Sean Manning's recent monograph aims to take stock of the research produced over the last two centuries on a subject (the military organization of the Achaemenid empire) which - surprisingly given the importance of the topic on the one hand and, on the other, in the light of the development of similar currents of study in other areas of antiquity, especially with regard to the Roman empire - still appears relatively neglected and, above all, in need of being freed from a series of prejudices that have considerably hampered its autonomous and scientifically sound development, in the wake of what happened, for example, to the study of the institutions developed by the Achaemenids to govern the immense territories of which, starting from the late 6th century BCE, they had become masters. Underpinning the volume there are three basic assumptions that can be summarized as follows.

First: in spite of the tumultuous development (not least of methodological order) of the historiography on the Achaemenid empire in the course of at least the last 40 years, the armies of Cyrus (the Great), Xerxes and Darius III (on whom we have the most information) are - still - judged and studied starting *either* from the classical literary sources (which precisely on these armies provide the only narratives of some consistency that we possess) *or*, even when we try to make use of *other* documentation (primary sources from the territories of the empire itself), through the interpretative categories that the classical authors have already established around the 4th century (not least in the wake of events considered capital for the formation of the self-consciousness of the West as Marathon, Salamis and Alexander's campaign) and that have been inherited by an almost uninterrupted tradition of subsequent studies (the most conspicuous example being Victor Davis Hanson's scholarship, which is critically addressed through the whole book).

Second: far from simply constituting an exotic backdrop against which to stage the exploits of Greek hoplites and/or *Sakā* cavalry, the Achaemenid troops were complex organisms, composed of flesh-and-blood individuals endowed with their own interests, ambitions and ability to influence those in charge of them as well as heirs of a centuries-old tradition capable at the same time to innovate in order to meet the needs imposed by the changes in the surrounding world as well as by *endogenous* drives (not only, therefore, nor in a prominent way on the basis of the impact with the "Greek miracle") coming from different socio-political groups that contributed to the build-up of the armies of the Great King.

Third: in the face of these considerations, the only way to profitably study Achaemenid military history must be based on a study as comprehensive as possible (ideally *exhaustive*) of *all* available documentary categories, according to the model provided, just to cite a particularly authoritative example, by two impressive essays by Christopher Tuplin (1987 and 2010) on Achaemenid garrisons and cavalry.

As suggested by the work's very subtitle (*Past Approaches, Future Prospects*), Manning's volume is primarily intended as a critical review of the research conducted so far. Yet, the six chapters that make up this detailed study go considerably beyond this (in itself quite ambitious) goal, for example by making available to a wider

audience of historians of antiquity in a synthetic but extremely informed manner a huge body of Assyriological documentation which, for obvious linguistic difficulties, tends to be excluded from the investigation of scholars trained in different traditions (especially the classicist one).

Upon a careful reading of the monograph, it will be noticed how the above-mentioned critical assessment is already fulfilled in the *History of research* that forms chapter 1 (p. 21-65). Chapter 2 (p. 65-115), on the other hand, deals with the contextualization of the development of the Achaemenid armies within the broader context of Ancient Near Eastern history (according to a line of research clearly influenced, among others, by Robert Rollinger). This is a fundamental chapter in the economy of the entire volume, because it offers, on a documentary basis, the most incontrovertible refutation of the claim (still very much in vogue) that would have the Achaemenid tactics and military organization develop in a solely *responsive* manner to the challenges posed to the Great King by his enemies (especially the Greeks). In chapter 3 (p. 115-154), dedicated to the (self)representation of war as it appears in the royal inscriptions from Cyrus' cylinder to Bīsūtūn, Manning explores some fundamental aspects of Achaemenid ideology, such as, for instance, the reasons that lead the Persian emperors to wage war, the concept of rebellion, the legitimate use of violence and the audience to which such a conceptual elaboration was addressed, while illustrating - always from a polemological point of view - the formation of categories such as 1. space 2. time and 3. the very notion of empire as they emerge (not coincidentally against the backdrop of a deadly (civil) war) towards the end of the 6th century at the beginning of the reign of Darius. In chapter 4 (p. 155-222) the perspective shifts towards the life of the camp and of the soldiers in an attempt to explore in more detail the mechanisms at the base of such a complex machine as the Persian armies. In the background of the discussion (which is predominantly based on a skillful use of cuneiform documentation) hovers the inveterate thesis of the eminently "feudal" nature (p. 215-218) of Achaemenian society, which Manning stubbornly strives to refute. In its place emerges instead a much more complex - and for this reason considerably more stimulating - picture within which individuals were able to obtain financing, negotiate their participation in the expeditions of the Kings and, above all, protect their own patrimony (movable and immovable) in the face of the risks - at least equal, if not superior, to the benefits - that participation in the military campaigns of satraps and monarchs entailed. Chapter 5 (p. 223-260) provides an overview (on a regional basis) of the archaeological evidence available to us to shed light on the constitution of the contingents deployed in battle by the Great King(s). This is the most descriptive and least analytical section of the entire monograph, which can nevertheless be used profitably by specialists in each of the (macro)regional contexts discussed by Manning for further study. Finally, chapter 6 (p. 261-348) offers a thorough critical discussion of the evidence provided by Greek and Roman historiography, for centuries the preferred source of information for the study of Achaemenid troops "in action".

Apart from the (very much relevant) methodological observations (p. 262-286), the most interesting section of the chapter is perhaps the one dedicated to the formulation of an "alternative model of combat mechanics" (p. 292-318), which is in explicit contrast to a long tradition of studies (starting at least with Eduard Meyer) which appears, according to Manning, unduly and excessively influenced both by the above-mentioned "feudal" stereotype (to which the "Iranian"/"Aryan" one might be added, hence the disproportionate importance attributed to cavalry) and by the influence of the Greek (and Roman) perception of *what* an "eastern" army (thus not only Achaemenid, but also Parthian and perhaps even Sāsānid) *must* have been and of *how* it *must* have

worked. To demonstrate, in any case, that - as already suggested by Briant - it is nevertheless possible to profitably use classical historiography to access a “core” of Achaemenid information, three case studies (p. 319-348) devoted respectively 1. to the calculation of the troops deployed in battle 2. to the inveterate hypothesis according to which the Persians would have adopted Greek-type weapons and armour (because they were superior) and 3. to the siege techniques show how classical testimonies *can* be studied in an “unfamiliar way” and thus are able to lead to interpretations of the functioning of the Persian military machine that can withstand much more punctual (because based on a broader spectrum of sources *and* on sounder methodology) criticism than those which it is possible to reach on the base of the traditional models.

In a nutshell, *Armed Force in the Teispid-Achaemenid Empire* is a valuable contribution to research on the Persian empire that can (and in the case of classicists *must*) be read with profit by a wide audience of scholars as well as by readers interested in this exciting - and neglected - aspect of Ancient Near Eastern history.

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