

## MILE PASSUM AND THE PLAINS OF HELLAS

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For thousands of years the western view of military history has focused intently upon the examination of past battles for the possibility of success in future combat endeavors. Military history has also sought inspiration from particular conflicts and combatants. This focus on inspiration and education has affected the selection of what are now considered classics of military history, and this focus has colored the lens through which military history has long been viewed. This western view of military history was set into motion by Classical Greece and Rome's own usage of military history for education and inspiration. The modern western military historian can see the beginnings of the historiography of the discipline through the emphasis which the Classical historians placed upon traits such as discipline, valor, and courage.

Historiography, in general terms, is the study of works upon a particular subject, and in specifics, it can be narrowly focused on seemingly esoteric perspectives within a discipline: feminist, Marxist, neo-conservative, or strictly military approaches to the subject of history. In regards to the historiography of military history, the early works - especially those of the Classical Greeks and Romans - approached the study of military history in a decidedly didactic manner.

A prime example of this didactic nature of classical literature can be found in a Roman of means from the Roman Republic (but near the birth of the Empire), resides in the study of Caius Julius Caesar, conqueror of Gaul and eventual Emperor of Rome. Caesar was raised in a moderately wealthy family, and he "had been well educated by a former slave,"<sup>1</sup> who taught Caesar how to both read and write in Latin and Greek. With a solid foundation in both languages Caesar was not only well versed in the tales of Rome's heroic past, but in the exploits of the Greeks as well. Caesar was familiar with the writings of Polybius, who believed in the influence of Xenophon's *March of the Ten Thousand* upon Alexander the Great, and Caesar was also quite knowledgeable in regards to Homer's *The Iliad* and the heroes of the tale.<sup>2</sup>

From those readings Caesar took not only inspiration, but elements for a strong military education as well. Later in his military career, when campaigning in Gaul and facing off against the Gaul leader Vercingetorix, Caesar at the town of Gergovia led "the Gauls away by the venerable Greek stratagem of spreading marching soldiers out to make fewer appear like more."<sup>3</sup> Often, when confronting an enemy, Caesar applied the Greek concept of 'shock' attack, and "the crash of formations into one another,"<sup>4</sup> as well as techniques for encouraging troop morale, all of which were "profoundly influenced by Greek models."<sup>5</sup>

Caius Julius Caesar was raised with what can be considered a traditional education for a Roman citizen of his station. Since both Classical Greece and Rome were products of their military pasts, both real and imagined, the historiography of their military histories played an essential role in the education of middle and upper-class Greeks and Romans. These men were expected to serve their nations

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Grant, *Julius Caesar* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 1997), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis Showalter, *Seminar I, Week 1, Overview* (Colorado: Colorado College, 2006), 1.

<sup>3</sup> J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (Harvard: Yale University Press, 2005), 214.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

militarily in times of need, a civic militarism propelled not only by a desire to protect their homes and societies, but encouraged by the didactic education presented by their military histories.

The fact that the foundation of the historiography of western military history lies in the military writings of Classical Greece and Rome's should not be surprising. The western world itself - the United States of America and Western Europe - is merely an extension of those two societies. The fledgling democracies of Greece; the citizen soldiers of their city states; the laws and electoral history of Rome; and dedication to state and country are all hallmarks of the modern western world. Even the once dominant religion of the western world, the Catholic Church, is still based in Rome, and the romance languages find their base in Latin and Greek.

Western militaries still follow the examples set by the Greeks and the Romans, both of whom looked back upon their own histories (and for the Romans the histories of the Greeks). Even to this day the writings of the Greek historian Xenophon are believed to be "the best authority we have for the half century which it covers."<sup>6</sup> Part of Xenophon's authority on this time period, and thus his influence on the historiography of military history, stems from the fact that:

he was an intimate friend of King Ageselaus of Sparta, whom he accompanied on several of the campaigns described in the *Hellenica*.<sup>7</sup>

Military historians even as recently as the mid-twentieth century, in keeping with the tradition of Greek and Roman historians, have stated that the study of Classical Greece, especially:

the period from the Persian Wars to the death of Alexander continue to be a most fascinating and profitable subject of study.<sup>8</sup>

Xenophon is not the only classical historian of note, however. The list is long and each historian has been translated numerous times. Authors such as Arrian, Herodotus, and Thucydides are prominent on that list. In the past, and today, Thucydides was seen as important for having drawn:

his narrative fresh from the lips of men after hearing the different accounts of the contending parties.<sup>9</sup>

From the personal narratives of the men involved in the conflict readers can draw conclusions and ideas from the battle, an educational process that can not only inform but inspire future commanders and combatants.

Historian J.E. Lendon speaks of this inspirational process, using Homer's *Iliad* as an example:

To mine out of the *Iliad* a convincing account of how men of any specific historical period fought is impossible: here the *Iliad* is important rather for how later men interpreted it.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Xenophon, *Hellenica Books I-V* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), xi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Godolphin, *The Greek Historians: The Complete and Unabridged Works of Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian, Volume I* (New York: Random House, 1942), xx.

<sup>9</sup> Thucydides, *Thucydides: In Two Volumes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), xvi.

<sup>10</sup> J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (Harvard: Yale University Press, 2005), 17.

The Classical historians and commanders would seek out those morals and traits of the combatants whom they admired the most. Herodotus, in fact, relates how the Athenians, when preparing to battle the Persians during the Persian Wars, sought out “the country house of one Miltiades...who traced his pedigree back to Ajax”,<sup>11</sup> Ajax, one of the heroes of the *Iliad*. Even in combat men sought inspiration from the past, and Herodotus felt the need to relate such things as “a heavy cloud which overshadowed the Persian armament”<sup>12</sup> and how some participants of the fight:

averred that they saw the heroes Ajax, Teucer, and Achilles battling for their homesteads in Salamis and Aegina.<sup>13</sup>

Education and inspiration, therefore, were both essential for the military effectiveness of the Greek commanders. Education and inspiration also affected the historiography of military history with Greek historians taking notes upon great events and the heroes of the past, heroes who then inspired the combatants to greatness. Greece itself, however, was absorbed into the spreading Roman Empire. This absorption in turn allowed many of the facets of the Hellenic culture, not the least of which was their conceptualization of military history, to become part of the ever changing Roman culture. This absorption of Hellenic culture thus added another element to the historiography of the discipline as the Romans took hold of the baton of military history.

Rome, like the Greeks, used their military history for education as well as inspiration. Even the recent past for the Romans was addressed, as shown by Livy when he stated that:

Scipio, for his part, spoke of the Spanish campaigns, of the recent battles in Africa and of the enemy’s admission of weakness and guilt in that it had forced them to sue for a peace which their ineradicable perfidy forbade them to keep.<sup>14</sup>

The Roman historian Flavius Vegetius Renatus distilled a great deal of military wisdom from Rome’s past, and offered up some maxims as:

war does not depend entirely upon numbers or mere courage: only skill and discipline will insure it.<sup>15</sup>

He also stated that:

the Romans owed the conquest of the world to no other cause than continual military training, exact observance of discipline in their camps and unwearied cultivation of the arts of war.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> George C. Swayne, *Herodotus* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), 134.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>14</sup> Livy, *The War with Hannibal: Books XXI - XXX of the History of Rome from its Foundations* (England: Penguin Books, 1972), 659.

<sup>15</sup> Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *A Military Classic: The Military Institutions of the Romans* (Harrisburg: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1952), 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

A thousand years after Vegetius' writing Niccolo Machiavelli continued this harkening to the Classical past when he spoke on Roman discipline and informed his prince that:

the Romans punished with death, not only those who failed in their duty when they were on guard, but all those who abandoned their posts in time of battle.<sup>17</sup>

Vegetius also spoke of the training, stating that:

young recruits in particular must be exercised in running, in order to charge the enemy with vigor, to occupy on occasion an advantageous post with greater expedition, and balk the enemy in their designs upon the same; and that they may, when sent to reconnoiter, advance with speed, return with celerity and more easily overtake the enemy in a pursuit.<sup>18</sup>

This idea of discipline, as well as physical conditioning and training, is carried from the armies of Classical Rome and Greece, as described by the Classical military historians, to the modern militaries and their varying forms of basic training. Today's militaries continue to follow and stress the Roman examples of courage, honor, and discipline.

Author J. E. Lendon, an expert on the military history of Classical Greece and Rome, states simply that "Rome was born fighting,"<sup>19</sup> thus their own emphasis on courage and honor. And while many historians over the centuries have stressed the discipline of Rome's armies, Lendon also believes that:

Both discipline and cohesion assume their proper role in military successes when they are understood in the context of a fundamental Roman cultural drive: competition in aggressive bravery arising from a heroic tradition of single combat.<sup>20</sup>

Rome, like her predecessor Greece, used the history of combat not only for education (such as *De Bello Gallico* by Caius Julius Caesar), but for inspiration, for:

the Roman past, real or imagined, combined with the admiration of later men for that past, is a powerful tool for explaining how the Romans fought.<sup>21</sup>

For Classical Rome its history was rich with a tradition of single combat:

Romans believed that this practice of one-on-one dueling, on the battlefield was sanctified by immemorial tradition. Romulus, they believed, the very founder of Rome, had been the first to dedicate to Jupiter the spoila opima, "the noble spoils," a special honor for a Roman commander who had killed the opposing commander with his own hand.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Art of War* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1990), 163.

<sup>18</sup> Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *A Military Classic: The Military Institutions of the Romans* (Harrisburg: The Military Service Publishing Company, 1952), 18.

<sup>19</sup> J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers & Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (Harvard: Yale University Press, 2005), 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 174-175.

The fact that Roman commanders actively partook in combat should come as no surprise then, when the very founder of Rome himself competed in single combat. Julius Caesar, in Gaul, writes how he:

snatched a shield from one of the soldiers in the rear (for he himself had come without a shield), he advanced to the front of the line, and addressing the centurions by name, and encouraging the rest of the soldiers, he ordered them to carry forward the standards.<sup>23</sup>

This example shows not only Caesar's personal bravery, but an innate understanding of the demands of command as well as a desire to live up to the courageous past of his cultural heritage as presented by the military history of Classical Rome. Caesar's actions on the field have thus added to historiography of Rome's own military history.

The historiography of Classical Greece and Rome created a plan of battle for the western societies which would sprout from their Classical traditions, and which would follow them in the centuries to come. The historians of Classical Greece and Rome kept those histories of conquest, bravery, and discipline alive for future generations. Discipline which is still the hallmark of exceptional troops, as is evidenced by the Pope's unit of Swiss Guards; the British Queen's Royal Guards at Buckingham Palace; and the United States of America's Army guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Bravery is rewarded with medals, the highest of which are the Victoria Cross for the United Kingdom and the Congressional Medal of Honor for the United States of America. In America stories of great fighters still make their way around classrooms and dinner tables, the names of Alvin C. York, Audie Murphy, and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlin to select but a handful.

All of these markers - bravery, courage, discipline - are heralds of an ancient past, and thus an ancient historiography, one begun by such military historians as Livy, Herodotus, Polybius, and Julius Caesar himself. This Classical military history is still considered important, as evidenced by the fact that military colleges in the United States of America still teach them. The Virginia Military Institute offers courses in both Classical Greece and Rome: Greece "from the Trojan War to the death of Cleopatra;"<sup>24</sup> and Rome from its "conquest of the Mediterranean and the fall of the empire."<sup>25</sup> The United States Naval Academy at Annapolis also offers courses in Greek and Roman history. In a class at the Naval Academy titled "Imperial Rome"<sup>26</sup> the brief prospectus states that it will examine "military defense."<sup>27</sup> The course concerning Greece, titled "Athens: Military Democracy"<sup>28</sup> looks at how Athens was adept at

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<sup>23</sup> Caius Julius Caesar, *"De Bello Gallico" & Other Commentaries of Caius Julius Caesar* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1929), Book II, Paragraph XXV.

<sup>24</sup> Virginia Military Institute website, "HI452. *Ancient Greece 3-0-3.*" <http://www.vmi.edu/departments.asp?durki=1633> (accessed December 23, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> Virginia Military Institute, website "HI453. *Ancient Rome 3-0-3.*" <http://www.vmi.edu/departments.asp?durki=1633> (accessed December 23, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> United States Naval Academy website, "HH312 *Imperial Rome.*" <http://www.usna.edu/History/weboffer.html> (accessed December 23, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> United States Naval Academy website, "HH311 *Athens: Military Democracy.*" <http://www.usna.edu/History/weboffer.html> (accessed December 23, 2006).

“surviving extended wars.”<sup>29</sup> The United States Military Academy at West Point offers “Ancient and Medieval Warfare”<sup>30</sup> which will focus “on warfare through the dawn of recorded history”<sup>31</sup> and:

study the campaigns of Alexander, the military methods of the Romans...and other topics which are not covered in the core military courses.<sup>32</sup>

These courses taught in the military colleges of the United States of America are another chapter in the historiography of military history. Considering the Classical Greek and Roman texts which are still taught and have survived millennia to the present day, the focus on education and inspiration within the texts stand out strongly. Yet as the didactic nature of these works is presented, the inquisitive reader must wonder what, if anything was lost through the years. What texts lacked enough of education, inspiration, or both to be included in the canon of military history’s historiography? How well do those texts represent the past, and if so, does this affect the overall historical value of those texts? As for the question regarding representation we cannot know unless other, contradicting works should appear. And as for any effects, either for good or ill, that that the nature of the surviving texts might have in their historical work is a moot point. The texts are what have survived - nothing more, and nothing less.

This historiography of military history for western civilization then was begun in Classical Greece by such authors as Polybius, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon; and Roman authors such as Livy, Renautus, Vegetius, and Julius Caesar. These men with their histories decided that the history of combat could be used to both inspire and educate their societies. By choosing which accounts to relate, these authors shaped the historiography of military history - a history of military historians praising valor, courage, and discipline. Books and magazines dedicated to military history still abound, and military historians wait eagerly in the wings for the next tale of courage and discipline - so that they too might follow the path laid down so long ago on the plains of ancient Hellas, and by the mile passum of Rome’s Legions.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> United States Military Academy website, “*HI370 Ancient and Medieval Warfare*.” <http://www.dean.usma.edu/departments/history/web03/history...> (accessed December 23, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

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