

Nikoloutsos, Konstantinos P., ed. *Brill's Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Warfare on Film*. Leiden: Brill, 2023. ISBN: 9789004686816.

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Studies in classical reception have appeared with increasing frequency in recent years, covering a wide variety of popular media, topics, and themes. However, as emphasized by editor Konstantinos Nikoloutsos in his introduction to this extensive collection (576 pages of text) featuring chapters by 20 authors, a surprising omission from this scholarship has been a book devoted specifically to the cinematic depiction of warfare in the classical world. *Brill's Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Warfare on Film*, which is part of the Brill's Companions in Classical Studies series, helps to fill this gap. Some readers might feel misled by the term "warfare" in the title since few chapters focus narrowly on the depiction of battles and fewer still devote much space to the fraught issue of "historical accuracy". However, the chapters, whose target audience is classicists and ancient historians, represent the cutting edge of classical reception studies, treating a wide selection of movies through a variety of approaches on the depiction of warfare in its broadest sense. Altogether, the collection is a stimulating and valuable addition to the corpus of classical reception studies on an essential topic by some of the best scholars in the field.

The book is divided into eight thematic parts, containing from one to five chapters each. Part 1 consists of an introduction by the editor that situates this book within reception scholarship, stresses how films in this genre often represent receptions of earlier receptions of the ancient sources, and explains how recent studies typically go beyond questions of historical accuracy to consider the artistic, technical, commercial, and political aspects of these films. Part 2 contains the book's only sustained analysis of the historical accuracy of cinematic depictions of ancient Greek and Roman warfare. Jeremy Armstrong's chapter shows that movies depicting the Roman army in battle have straddled a fine line between historical accuracy and artistic license to create stereotypes to serve modern agendas that glorify "uncivilized" yet natural and free rebels against "civilized," well-organized, machine-like, and oppressive Romans. In Chapter 3 Elias Koulakiotis argues that Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) depicts warfare both from a historical birds-eye view of the Battle of Gaugamela, which emphasizes the ordered formations and strategy described in ancient sources, and from a heroic perspective in the midst of the Battle of the Hydaspes River, which portrays the great leader in hand-to-hand combat. This progression in battle perspectives visually expresses Alexander's spiritual journey from naïve idealism and personal ambition to an understanding of the harsh realities of war and its demand for self-sacrifice.

Part 3 approaches cinematic depictions of warfare in ancient Greece and Rome through the lens of the film industry's star-making machine. In Chapter 4 Michael Williams uses *The Sign of the*

Cross (1932) and *Cleopatra* (1934) as case studies to show that Hollywood studios and the fan press tied movie stars and the Roman military commanders they portrayed to contemporary ideas about leadership, politics, gender, and sexuality to attract audiences back into movie theaters during the Great Depression. Chapter 5 by Djoymi Baker compares stars Brad Pitt in *Troy* (2004) and Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson in *Hercules* (2014) to illustrate shifting audience tastes concerning the physiques of Hollywood leading men, how digital enhancement complicates audience demands for authenticity, and the impact of these phenomena on the filmic depiction of ancient Greek martial heroes.

The four chapters of Part 4 investigate the subject of women in ancient Greek and Roman warfare on screen. In Chapter 8 Irene Berti surveys depictions of women warriors in film since 2000 and concludes that they betray a distinction between American and non-American productions. The former, such as *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014) and its depiction of the warrior queen Artemisia, reflect modern gender norms such that even females who “fight like men” must also be hyper-feminine vixens who manipulate men with their sexual charms. On the other hand, non-American productions depict female military leaders, including the title characters in *Boudica, Warrior Queen* (2003, UK), *Boudica: Rise of a Warrior Queen* (2019, UK), and *The Legend of Tomiris* (2019, Kazakhstan), as liberated, feminist, national icons. Anastasia Bakogianni’s Chapter 10 focuses on the impact of warfare on non-combatant women in modern Greek cinema through a comparison of the films of Michael Cacoyannis (*Electra* [1962], *The Trojan Women* [1971], *Iphigenia* [1977]) and Theo Angelopoulos (*Reconstruction* [1970], *The Traveling Players* [1975]). She shows how both filmmakers use the Trojan War as a vehicle to promote anti-war agendas through the perspective of women but in different cinematic ways. Whereas Cacoyannis maintains the ancient Greek settings of his sources, Angelopoulos sets his movies in modern Greece while drawing on the Trojan War as inspiration for his plots and characters.

Part 5 contains two chapters on Western colonialism and racism, including Arthur Pomeroy’s study of three Italian films that reveal how reception of Salgari’s 1906 novel about the Punic Wars, *Cartagine in fiamme*, changed over time. Although Pastrone’s *Cabiria* (1914) glorifies pre-WWI Italian imperialism and Gallone’s *Scipione l’africano* (1937) promotes the ideology of unity through a supreme leader during the Fascist period, Gallone’s post-Fascist *Cartagine in fiamme* (1960) rejects notions of Italy’s imperial greatness and opts for an intimate story of a doomed romance with the Punic Wars only as a historical backdrop. In Chapter 12 Sean Easton argues that the depictions of the Battle of the Hydaspes River and the subsequent mutiny of Alexander the Great’s army in Modi’s *Sikander* (1941) and the various iterations of Stone’s *Alexander* (2004-2014) illustrate how the two directors used cinematographic experimentation to express contrasting themes. Modi reused violent battle scenes from Gallone’s *Scipione l’africano* (1937) to make a statement against both Fascist and British colonialism. Stone uses color coding, including infrared film stock, to emphasize the brutality of battle and align the audience’s

perception with that of the wounded Alexander, whose ambition and disregard for danger cannot be matched by his army, whose mutiny figuratively kills him and his dream of world conquest.

The longest section of the book, Part 6, includes five chapters on the impact of modern politics on depictions of ancient warfare in film. Robert Rushing takes a unique approach in Chapter 14 by considering how sound, particularly the musical score, serves as a subliminal political signifier in 1950s-1960s peplum films. These films promote a populist, peaceful, and benevolent authoritarianism by accompanying scenes of legitimate monarchies with soundtracks of sweeping melodies and rich harmonies, while employing cacophonous noise and exotic music to accompany scenes of the warfare and decadent palace life associated with illegitimate tyrants. Italian films remain the focus of the next chapter by Renata Senna Garraffoni, who examines *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969) and argues that the famous director created a metahistorical film that reflects the anti-military zeitgeist of the 1960s. Drawing inspiration from such earthy ancient sources as Petronius' *Satyricon* for storyline and Pompeiian wall paintings for visual cues, Fellini imagines the private lives and loves of ordinary ancient Romans that have been overshadowed by the glorification of warfare and military leaders that dominates most ancient sources and their epic film receptions.

Twenty-first century films portraying the brutality of war, the impact of war on veterans, and asymmetric warfare and counterinsurgency are the subject of Part 7. In Chapter 18 Hannah-Marie Chidwick investigates the increasingly graphic depiction of violence in scenes of warfare in post-Gladiator (2000) films set in ancient Rome, including *Centurion* (2010), *The Last Legion* (2007), and *The Eagle* (2011). Approaching these films through the lens of violence studies and critical military studies and analyzing viewer comments on YouTube clips, she argues that these movies' hyper-violent depictions of battle follow recent trends in cinema to convey a ready-made sense of authenticity that upholds viewers' expectations of what Roman warfare "should" look like, thereby perpetuating film-industry and ideologically driven myths at the expense of historical reality. Brett Ratner's *Hercules* (2014) features again in Chapter 19 by Owen Rees, this time in an examination of its portrayal of military veterans. Rees argues that Ratner simplifies and de-mythologizes Hercules' story to present the hero as a veteran of war in a manner that upholds audience expectations of the veteran experience based on earlier film traditions, while acknowledging society's ambivalent attitude toward such men.

The entire collection is concluded in Part 8 with an epilogue by series editor Lee L. Brice, who summarizes common themes running through the chapters and offers suggestions for further research on the depiction of ancient Greek and Roman warfare in film. *Brill's Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Warfare on Film* is a stimulating and useful book on an essential aspect of classical reception. Well-edited with a minimum of errors, each chapter contains thorough bibliographies and filmographies, and the entire collection is covered by a short index, making this book a valuable resource for those doing research in the field. Its score of chapters

by some of the most prolific scholars in the field covers a wide range of films and themes. Moreover, the authors employ various approaches that treat warfare in its broadest sense, going well beyond narrow studies of combat or questions of historical accuracy and authenticity. Thus, the book is a welcome addition to the field of classical reception studies and is highly recommended for advanced students and specialists, even as it remains accessible to all who are interested in film and the classical world.

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