

# *Res Militares* 25.1 (2026) (ISSN 1533-4708)

## Society of Ancient Military Historians

Review of Hyland, John O. and Khodadad Rezakhani, eds. *Brill's Companion to War in the Ancient Iranian Empires*. Brill's Companions to Classical Studies: Warfare in the Ancient Mediterranean World 9. Leiden: Brill, 2024. ISBN: 978-90-04-70821-1 (hardcover)

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Since the 1980s, a few bold ancient historians have been building the discipline of ancient Iranian studies. While the sources are diverse and fragmentary, nobody would argue that you can understand classical Greece separately from the Achaemenids, or the Roman empire without its Arsacid and Sasanid rivals. Ancient Iranian military history has been slower to develop since it lies under double stigma. However, we now have this volume with chapters by scholars across Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America. The only similar projects known to me are A. Shapur Shahbazi's 1986 article on pre-Islamic Iranian armies (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, vol. 2), and overviews of ancient warfare or ancient Persia (e.g. Huyse, *La Perse Antique*, 2005, de Souza (ed.), *The Ancient World at War: A Global History*, 2008).

Structurally, the twenty chapters consist of an introduction and conclusion, one chapter on Elam, six on the Achaemenids, one on Alexander the Great, one on the Seleucids, three on the Arsacids of Parthia, and six on the Sasanids. This reflects a regional concept of Iran, whereas research in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century often had a racial or linguistic concept. Armenia is addressed in passing as not quite Iranian or an empire. Two chapters cover more than one empire (Pirngruber, ch. 8, on Akkadian cuneiform texts, and Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk, ch. 15, on cavalry equipment). The editors emphasized diplomacy and relations between conquerors and conquered, with at least one chapter in each section focused on these topics. Most of the authors succeeded at providing overviews of their topics with sufficient context for newcomers, although the complexity and scope of some topics made this difficult.

Although the chapters were written independently, the editors and publishers did their best to link the chapters into a larger work. There are three useful color maps of the empires and a few other illustrations provided by individual authors. These are especially helpful in Álvarez-Mon and Wicks' survey of Elamite warfare (ch. 2), a topic not often covered in illustrated books. The brief general index ties the chapters together with entries such as the Achaemenid, Seleucid, and Arsacid title *karanos* (p. 672, s.v. general).

Due to limits of space, I will forgo a chapter-by-chapter commentary and focus on some general themes.

One common theme is that Iranian archaeology has been slow to develop. Whereas

archaeologists of Western Europe or Egypt have whole databases of finds and can generate charts and statistics, contributors to this volume rely on a colorful collection of individual sites and objects. While the finds from Dura-Europos are spectacular, most Sasanid silverware, arms, and armor lack archaeological provenance. Ancient Iranians did not produce large amounts of pottery with paintings of battles, or many sculptures of warriors. Skupniewicz and Maksymiuk (ch. 15) note that aside from the famous royal rock reliefs, Arsacid and Sasanid artists show more hunting scenes and standing or seated warriors than battle scenes.

However, Iranian numismatics are well-developed. While most ancient historians are aware that Parthian coins are used to reconstruct Parthian history (Overtoom, ch. 11), the coins of the Iranian Huns have been used to reconstruct the histories of these dynasties (Haug, ch. 16). I would be interested in knowing more about the findspots of these coins and seeing some examples.

Rop (ch. 6) and Gregoratti (ch. 12) challenge established ideas about combat mechanics. Rop proposes that the wall of wicker shields backed by archers, best known from Herodotus' descriptions of the battles of Plataea and Mycale, "was not the signature or standard Persian formation. Much like the Roman *testudo*, it was a memorial and impressive tactic utilized only under specific circumstances" (p. 199). Gregoratti notes the paradox that although the battle of Carrhae became the *locus classicus* for Parthian tactics, most stories of other battles describe either charges of armored lancers or clouds of swift horse archers who could not survive close combat. The next time we hear of Arsacid horse archers and lancers working together is Herodian's account of the Battle of Nisibis in 217. Both Rop and Gregoratti argue against the assumption that the battle we know best was a typical battle.

Under the Arsacids, Iranian armies changed from mostly infantry with a small, mounted elite to mostly cavalry with some servants and laborers on foot. Achaemenid art shows heroes wrestling and stabbing on foot, but Arsacids and Sasanids had themselves carved as horsemen (p. 480). Since there is no chapter on the early Arsacids, this volume cannot answer the question why Parthian armies were so 'Turanian' from 55 BCE onwards. Sasanid armies, with their armored cavalry able to shoot the bow or fight at close quarters, seem to belong to a different tradition. Mentioning Turan (the deserts and mountains of Central Asia) raises the issue that this book has little to say about Bactria-Margiana and the Central Asian frontier (e.g. p. 55). There are very few written sources from this region until later times, and much of the archaeology is published in Russian and difficult to obtain (see Mairs, *The Archaeology of the Hellenistic Far East: A Survey. A Survey. Bactria, Central Asia and the Indo-Iranian Borderlands, c. 300 BC – AD 100*, 2011). How did contact with people from the steppes and deserts of Central Asia affect these empires? Have hoards of Parthian and Sasanid coins been found in Central Asia, like the caches of Roman coins found in Gotland?

Haug's chapter (ch. 16) on the Iranian Huns is the most detailed treatment of Iran and Turan. While one tradition recounts that Sasanid Shahanshah Peroz used Hephthalite armies to take the throne from his brother, he later attacked them and was killed. Haug notes that the Kidarite dynasty were great builders of walls and fortress-cities, whereas the Hephthalites avoided

engaging Peroz and tried to lure his armies into traps. Not all Central Asian peoples fought the same way, but large herds of horses, mighty cities, mines, and taxes on the Silk Roads allowed dynasties from Central Asia to threaten dynasties from Western Iran. Coloru (ch. 10) also observes that the Seleucids drew military resources from the deserts and steppes of Central Asia (Dahae horse-archers, cataphracts) and the Indus valley (war elephants) as well with the Aegean. Our western sources are not interested in exploring what these troops offered, or why the Arsacids accepted Greek culture but rejected the Macedonian phalanx.

Twenty years ago, ancient historians who wrote about war tended to stick to Greeks and Romans. Studies like the *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (2007) or Hans van Wees' *Greek Warfare: Myths and Realities* (2004) defined their topics narrowly and left other cultures for archaeologists and amateurs. This volume, and the recent *Wiley Companion to Greek Warfare* (2021), show that the mood is shifting (the latter volume has chapters on Thracians and Parthians as well as Dorians and Ionians).

This companion is a useful collection of scholarship which makes it possible to ask broad questions about ancient Iranian warfare in a rigorous, scholarly, and comparative way. Scholars of the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanid empires rarely work together, so such broad questions are rarely asked as part of ordinary work. It complements better-illustrated volumes with less intensive and professional research and expands on topics that surveys of these empires keep in the background. This book would be an excellent starting point for anyone who seeks information about the wars of the ancient Persians.

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