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Source: *Midlands Historical Review*, Vol. 4 (2020)

Published: 12/10/2020

URL: <http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/greek-military-service-in-the-ancient-near-east-pdf/>

Book Review: 'Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East, 401-330 BCE' by Jeffrey Rop

Gillian Owen

Jeffery Rop's, 'Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East,' questions several of the core theories around the use of Greek mercenaries in the 4th century, providing a critical analysis of ancient sources and modern scholarship. His book serves as a reply to several comprehensive accounts of Persian and Egyptian military history, such as Stephen Ruzicka's, 'Trouble in the West,' and John Hyland's, 'Persian Interventions', both of which serve as the inspiration for this book. Rop's core argument is a reconsideration of the 'Greek thesis' – a term coined by Pierre Briant, referring to the trend in modern scholarship to accept accounts of Greek military superiority. Through a series of case studies, Rop challenges the ideas of Greek military superiority presented by the Greek thesis; offering alternative reasons for the presence of Greek mercenaries in the Persian and Egyptian armies that go beyond the theory that they were selected as superior, hoplite troops. He uses this to contest the notion that the appearance of these troops was a sign of the decline in the Achaemenid Empire in the 4th century. Rop's overarching argument addresses two core theories. First, the Greek thesis is a misconception created by the ancient sources, and perpetuated in modern scholarship. Second, Greek soldiers in foreign armies were not mercenaries, but were recruited through political alliances. Rop utilises a strong military history approach, uncommon in current scholarship, to reconsider the evidence through a break-down of battle narratives. This method provides new insights and alternative versions of events that may explain the appearance of Greek mercenaries in foreign armies.

The book is aimed at scholars, drawing heavily from modern debate. However, Rop also intends it to be accessible to a more general audience. Its intrinsic relation to modern debate and reconceptualization of certain events and ideas, requires at least, a basic

understanding of the period, if not the modern scholarship. Therefore, the book is perhaps more suited to specialist Greek, Persian and Egyptian military and/or political historians; especially as the book is inciting a new take on this field. This should not deter undergraduates from approaching the book, as Rop's clear presentation of his arguments and modern debate makes it accessible to those willing to fully engage with Rop's arguments and analysis. Throughout the book, Rop supports his arguments with basic contexts and diagrams where necessary, enabling it to be read by a range of audiences and providing an inroad into modern discussions. The opening of the book provides general geographical maps and campaign routes, many of which would be familiar to those with a background in Greek military studies. The more poignant diagrams appear in the battle narratives, as Rop provides basic visual reconstructions of the battle formations. These provide essential context and understanding for the argument, particularly for readers unfamiliar with military history and battle sequences. Rop's analysis of the ancient sources and the literary techniques that influenced their accounts are, overall, worth consideration for future works addressing Greco-Persian political and military relations as they provide new insights and methodology. Discussion of the existing academic literature at the beginning of each section clearly situates the book within modern scholarship and challenges the reader to reconsider existing interpretations of Greek military history. As such, it is perhaps best read alongside other relevant works – although Rop provides enough scholarly context for all his arguments to be understood as a standalone piece.

The introductory chapter provides the foundations to the rest of the book. Rop presents an account of contemporary historiography highlighting specific elements of scholarship that are addressed through the rest of the work. He also provides a background to his primary sources; outlines his key arguments and key terms; and explains his methodology in the chapter. The chapter is titled, 'The Greek Thesis', borrowing Briant's term to describe the tendency of ancient and modern authors to attribute the presence of Greek soldiers in

foreign armies as indicators of Greek military superiority. This chapter explains the Greek Thesis, from its conception by the primary sources, through to modern scholarship. Rop establishes the existing arguments and justifies the need for his book. Rop's secondary argument, exploring political motivations for the hire of Greek mercenaries, is also established here. This argument challenges the idea that the Achaemenid Empire was in decline, and is developed much more in chapters three and six. He argues that Persia had political influence in Greece and was not reliant on Greek military power. The two literary tropes that Rop draws on throughout his critique of the ancient sources – the dynamic subordinate and the tragic advisor – are defined in this chapter, as a reference for the later discussions. Overall, the first chapter provides a solid basis for Rop to develop his own analyses in the subsequent chapters.

The second chapter, 'The Battle of Cunaxa', addresses the revolt of Cyrus the Younger, with the aid of the Greek contingent known as the Ten Thousand, against his brother King Artaxerxes II in 401BC. It is the first of two chapters in the book that deeply analyse one source through one event. In this chapter, Rop considers Xenophon's account of the battle of Cunaxa, discussing the literary techniques and biases of Xenophon. Xenophon is the generally preferred account for Cunaxa, as sources for battle narratives can vary dramatically. An example of this would be Xenophon's and Diodorus' account of the battle of Aegospotami, as they display remarkable differences; such as the way in which the Spartans attack the Athenian ships. Rop presents a critical analysis of the source and battle tactics to argue that Xenophon created a false perception of the Greeks' role in the battle. His analysis aims to combat two assumptions about the battle: one, that the Greeks were the best on the battlefield; secondly, that Cyrus ordered his Greeks to advance against the King in the centre. Rop develops a battle reconstruction to suggest that these ideas came about due to Xenophon's narrative techniques, for example, his use of focalisation highlighted the achievement of the Greeks, creating the impression that the Greek contingent was more important than it was.

The third chapter, 'Greece and the Rebellion of Cyrus the Younger', continues the discussion of chapter two and addresses a potential hole in the argument. The previous chapter argued against Greek superiority as the motive for their inclusion in Cyrus' army. Rop uses this chapter to suggest an alternative reason for their inclusion. He argues that Greek troops were more loyal than the Persians troops, contesting the argument that mercenaries were unreliable, as they were motivated by money. Rop develops the argument that Greek mercenaries were contracted through patron-client relationships, similar to the Greek idea of *xenia*. Similar ideas have been presented by Trundle as he discusses how ritualised friendship was common in mercenary relationships. Rop, however, expands this beyond what has been considered previously. He regards the concept of *xenia* in a Greco-Persian context, exploring how the power difference created a form of patron-client relationship that differed from the Greek concept of *xenia* – which was between equals. He argues that Greek mercenaries were contracted through personal relations to powerful Persian figures, who could support their personal ambitions in return for military service. He uses this idea to explain the Greeks' loyalty to Cyrus over the wealthier Artaxerxes, as their personal relations to Cyrus allowed him to offer different incentives. His presentation of Cyrus' army as a chain of patron relationships, and the political implications of the chapter, present a particularly interesting argument within the book and for the definition of a mercenary. It is something to be considered in future scholarship.

Chapter four takes a different approach than the rest of the chapters, as Rop discusses pairs of figures; exploring the use of the dynamic subordinate and tragic advisor trope. The dynamic subordinate relates to accounts where a subordinate, in these cases a Greek, outperforms their superior – here a Persian or Egyptian commander. The Tragic advisor trope refers to a case when the commander ignores the advice of another and subsequently fails. The lack of event focus creates a slight disjoint between the sections, as discussions of the specific individuals rely on a solid understanding of events between 400-360 BC. This can

be aided slightly by use of the timeline provided at the start of the book. Each subsection within the chapter works as a separate unit, highlighting a case where the dynamic subordinate, and/or the tragic advisor is present. As such, the chapter requires Rop's preliminary conclusion, found at the end of the chapter, to draw all the arguments together. The chapter considers five pairs: Conon and Pharnabazus, Chabrias and Acoris, Agesilaus and Tachos, Agesilaus and Nectanebos, and Iphicrates and Pharnabazus, the latter being the longest and most comprehensive. The discussions surrounding these pairings presents a convincing case for the use of the dynamic subordinate and tragic advisor as a cause for misconceptions over the superiority of Greek generals, but, suffers from a slight sense of repetition, as the same tropes are discussed across all five case studies. Rop's analysis provides interesting breakdowns of individuals' contributions, strategies, and the two tropes, but could have been supplemented by a slightly broader range of arguments, such as the value these individuals had in controlling their forces. Rop suggests three conclusions for the chapter, with the argument against the superiority of the Greek generals being predominant. Rop's other two conclusions; that Greek mercenaries were valued due to alliances, and that they were selected as specialist marines, are slightly overshadowed. It would have been interesting if Rop had made more of these conclusions in his individual pairs' analysis, as it is not until the preliminary conclusion that their significance is strongly highlighted, although they are discussed throughout the chapter. Despite this slight criticism, the arguments covered in the chapter are presented well. Each pair is discussed thoroughly, and the preliminary conclusion highlights the key ideas while citing previous discussion in the chapter to support them.

Both chapter five and six consider single events. Chapter five discusses the revolt of Artabazus, while the sixth chapter considers the Persian conquest of Egypt through a critique of Diodorus. Rop uses these chapters to reinforce ideas that have been previously presented, displaying how Rop uses this book to effectively argue a couple of key theories,

by exploring them in different situations. The revolt of Artabazus, a relatively minor part of Persian history, is discussed in chapter five as it strongly pertains to Rop's critique of the Greek thesis, as it presents the only case of the threat of Greek mercenaries being officially recognised by a Persian king. Through this chapter, Rop challenges the Greek thesis by questioning the validity of the mercenaries' decree and the accuracy of the sources' accounts. The chapter highlights a key agenda of Rop's book, as he uses the revolt of Artabazus to illustrate how easily modern scholarship accepts accounts that support the Greek thesis. Rop's methodology in addressing this event, displays how an in-depth critique of the sources can produce different interpretations of events; something he wants contemporary scholars to do in regards to the Greek thesis. In contrast, chapter six uses one source to analyse one event. In his analysis of the event, Rop re-engages several of his previous arguments, such as the dynamic subordinate and tragic advisor trope, in a new context. His argument that the Greek mercenaries were valued as sailors and marines is discussed at length in this chapter. The chapter displays how Rop's book is building an in-depth case for the reconsideration of a few key ideas, rather than an extensive exploration of a wide variety of events and theories.

The final two chapters discuss the appearance of Greek mercenaries in the Persian armies, opposing Macedonian conquest. Rop discusses the appearance of Greeks in the three main battles against Alexander the Great: Granicus River, Issus, and Gaugamela. Chapter Seven focuses in particular on the contributions of Memnon of Rhodes to the Persian army, arguing that he has a more modest role than the sources convey. The highlight of these two chapters is Rop's battle narratives, as he presents a lucid summary of the strategies used in these three key battles. He supplements this with simple, yet effective, diagrams displaying the battle lines, providing key visual tools to outline the battles' progress. Chapter eight's primary value is Rop's military analysis, as he uses it to counteract the idea that the Persians depended on Greek mercenaries. Rop suggests that the Greeks appear in the Persian

armies as a way for them to unofficially oppose Alexander. He suggests that they required Persian aid, rather than the Persian generals being reliant on superior Greek forces. The arguments of these latter chapters, while still relevant and convincing, are perhaps less impactful on Rop's overall discussion on the Greek thesis and political motivations for the hiring of Greek mercenaries. Unlike some of the previous chapters, the conclusions here do not pose vastly significant changes to the dynamic of Greco-Persian relations.

Rop's work presents an in-depth analysis of the ancient sources and offers a new take on conventional theories in Greek and Near Eastern military history. Rop's work deviates from the often-Greek centric narrative and manages to present a concise and well-rounded picture of Greco-Persian and Egyptian military history, that does an impressive job of considering sub-context and dynamics obscured by the primarily Greek source base. Rop's book manages to address a hole in contemporary scholarship highlighted by Gómez-Castro, who acknowledges historian's strong reliance on their sources and their fear of speculative analysis. Rop's method of combining military history with several literary approaches is innovative and highlights how this type of speculative analysis can provide interesting and new interpretations. Throughout the book, Rop successfully highlights the need for a reconsideration of the Greek thesis and reinterpretations of Greek mercenary actions. Rop's suggestion for the political implications of Greek mercenaries, particularly the idea of a patron-client relationship, presented an interesting take on Greco-Persian relationships that appears worth considering by future works on 4th century history. Rop's book has opened up a challenge to some of the more conventional ideas and it will be interesting to observe future academic dialogue raised in response to his critiques.

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