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Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East, 401–330

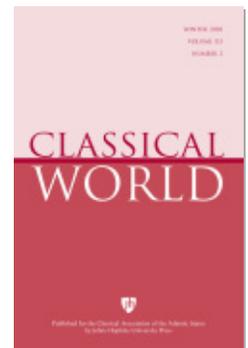
by Jeffrey Rop (review)

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Jeffrey Rop. *Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East, 401–330 BCE*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xxviii, 265. \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-108-49950-7.

Writing a revisionist history is a difficult task, especially for ancient historians. Almost always, the literary sources, such as we have, are entirely in the favor of the orthodox view of things, and old opinions die hard. In the volume under review, Rop sets himself just such a daunting job, to dismantle the notion that the Achaemenid Persian Empire ran into trouble in the 4th century BCE largely because of its lack of heavy infantry and a related reliance on Greek mercenaries. Rop chalks this idea, which he calls “the Greek Thesis,” up to self-serving Greek sources, who, through literary devices such as focalization, and motifs including the “Tragic Advisor” and the “Dynamic Subordinate,” wildly overstate the importance of Greek soldiers to Persian (and Egyptian) armies, and understate the influence of Persia and other powers in the Greek world. Where Rop succeeds most is in forcing us anew to read the surviving Greek literary sources as they are: one-sided and biased.

Rather than reassess the 4th-century history of Greco-Persian interactions by turning to sources such as Achaemenid literary and epigraphic records or the results of archaeological excavations of Achaemenid and Achaemenid-related sites, Rop takes a new look at the same Greek literary works on which ancient historians have traditionally relied. For example, to provide a new take on the Battle of Cunaxa in 401, in which the Ten Thousand Greeks fought for the rebel Persian prince Cyrus the Younger against his brother, King Artaxerxes II, Rop examines only the account of Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. By reading between the lines, Rop suggests, we can spot where Xenophon distorts events in such a way as to make the Greeks appear more tactically dominant than they were, and the Persian infantry more vulnerable to hoplites than was really the case. Rop argues that, rather than the Greek hoplites in Cyrus’ army causing the Persians arrayed against them so much fear that the Persians ran away, the Greeks were fooled by a well-executed feigned retreat that removed them from the battle’s main action, in which Cyrus was killed. Artaxerxes is thus rehabilitated as a subtle tactician, and Cyrus’ Greeks are revealed as hardly the decisive shock troops most students of history have thought them to be. Rop argues that Cyrus hired the Ten Thousand not because Greek hoplites were invincible on the battlefield, but because his Greek *xenoi* could be trusted far more than his Persian troops, all of whom quickly defected to Artaxerxes after the battle.

Rop gives the rest of 4th-century Greco-Persian history, up to the death of Darius III, the same treatment. Diodorus Siculus is especially scrutinized as a biased source who focuses so much on the actions of Greeks in the armies of Persians and Egyptians that the far greater number of Persian and Egyptian troops, and their far more consequential actions, are virtually ignored. The reader of Diodorus and other ancient sources is therefore left with the impression that battles and entire campaigns were won and lost because of the actions and advice of Greek soldiers and generals. Rop concludes that 4th-century history does not show that Greek mercenaries were essential to the Persians, much to the latter’s detriment, but rather that the Persian Empire continued to have tremendous influence in mainland Greece.

Despite having very little to say about Persian and other non-Greek and non-literary sources, Rop adds many important arguments to the growing trend

of scrutinizing the biased—and sometimes deceptive—nature of ancient Greek historical writers. The Greeks were not uniformly strategic and tactical geniuses any more than the Persians were merely hubristic blunderers, and the interaction between the two peoples was far more nuanced than the most-read sources indicate. However, by analyzing just these same sources, Rop can offer only speculative alternative reconstructions of events and motivations. Rop's is a worthwhile study, but it needs to be paired with the great volume of work now being done to evaluate the Achaemenid Empire on its own terms.

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