

# War and Soldiers in the Achaemenid Empire: Some Historiographical and Methodological Considerations\*

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## I. Introduction

Readers of Amélie Kuhrt's magnificent *Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period* are greeted with the following confession:

“There are some apparent omissions. I have no chapters devoted to the Persian armies and warfare nor on imperial or provincial administration. The evidence for this is bitty, often embedded in texts on which (our very partial) reconstruction of the political history depends. I hope that the accompanying notes, together with cross-referencing, will help to compensate for this lack.”<sup>1</sup>

In acknowledging that war was an important aspect of the Achaemenid empire, warning that the sources were difficult, and turning aside to focus on other areas, Professor Kuhrt was in good company. Most researchers into the Achaemenid empire since the 1980s have chosen to focus on less martial aspects of history such as court culture and source criticism. Researchers in different fields often touch on military matters but rarely reach outside their disciplines to compare or contrast research in other specialities. Thirty years after the Achaemenid History Workshops convinced scholars that a new approach was necessary, many researchers

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<sup>1</sup> Kuhrt, 2007: I.xxix.

continue to write about the Achaemenid army in a way which would be familiar to Eduard Meyer.

While this neglect of the military aspects of the empire reflects the particular context of research in the 1980s and 1990s (see below), it is difficult to justify today. The Achaemenid empire was created by a series of military campaigns, it passed from family to family as the result of such campaigns, and in the end it broke up because another series of wars left no clear winner. Many long-running debates, whether about how Darius became king, or whether the empire was “healthy” or “decadent” in the fourth century, deal with military questions. An empire, after all, is fundamentally a military entity. And in every other area of Achaemenid studies, scholars have found that when they contrasted different types of evidence and reconsidered their assumptions a new view was possible. It seems very likely that rethinking war in the Achaemenid empire would replace many established verities with questions, and that providing new answers to those questions would help scholars understand other aspects of the empire.

Achaemenid Army Studies has never become a recognized speciality with its own communities of scholars, reference texts, methods, and so on. One consequence of this is that scholarship on the army does not always reflect on earlier research, where ideas come from, and whether certain assumptions are justified or necessary. So far as I can tell, the longest overview of research into the Achaemenid army is a few pages in Stefan Bittner’s PhD thesis.<sup>2</sup> As part of my dissertation I have written a general study of past research from Hans Delbrück to the present. In this article, I would like to outline that study, describe some of the problems which I can see, and sketch some approaches which I think might be worth trying. Nevertheless, only a prolonged dialogue between scholars with many different perspectives and goals will reveal which approaches are the most effective.

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<sup>2</sup> Bittner, 1987: 73–83. Pierre Briant has also published some comments e.g. Briant, 2002: 1034–1038; Briant, 1997: 54; Briant 2001: 122, 123 n. 251. John Hyland (2011) addresses the question in a book review, and Christopher Tuplin has a page of remarks in Tuplin, 2010: 101, 102. Manning / Degen, in press, treats the history of research more generally.

## II. Classical Curiosity

The oldest and most profuse branch of scholarship is that driven by curiosity about Greek literature. Barnabé Brisson, for example, compiled the Greek and Latin sources for the Persians at war in the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Very many scholars who were really interested in Herodotus or the Peloponnesian War or Xenophon's vocabulary have found that they needed to know some things about the Persians to understand their main topic.

Classicists often write specialized studies of particular questions. Every decade or so someone publishes an article on the true name and identity of Herodotus' immortals, or how the Persians fought the battle of the Granicus.<sup>4</sup> The trouble with this sort of research is that it is driven by Greek literature and by earlier scholarship, rather than by interest in the Persian empire in general. When students of these questions venture to explore Near Eastern sources and scholarship, they rarely find much that is immediately helpful, and withdraw to their Oxford Classical Texts. Yet as thoughtful classicists have long acknowledged, many of the events which inspired Greek writers were less significant to people dwelling away from the Aegean.<sup>5</sup> Some of the 'Persian' terms which Greek writers recorded are equally obscure in texts from other regions.

Studies of the Battle of Marathon or Xerxes' invasion of Greece also tend to contain a study of the army.<sup>6</sup> These works typically paraphrase Herodotus and add a few details from other sources, such as comparing Persian soldiers in reliefs from Persepolis to Persian soldiers in Herodotus' catalogue. The basic approach was sketched by A.V.W. Jackson in 1894, although later authors have better pictures of the monuments and are more likely to cite excavation reports than the *Vendidad* for supporting evidence. At worst, these studies appeal to stereotypes about the orient to make their story more exciting. Peter Green, for example, alternately identifies the Persians with the Red Army and with an oriental horde

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<sup>3</sup> Brissonius, 1710 (posthumous revision of the Paris 1590 edition); Lewis, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> On e.g. the immortals Charles, 2011; Schmitt, 2006; Sekunda, 1988a: 69–70; Gnoli, 1981; Pagliaro, 1954 are some recent contributions to a literature extending back to the ancient lexicographers and scholiasts.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Cawkwell, 2005: 1.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Burn, 1962: 318–330; Hignett, 1963: 40–55; Green, 1996: 58–64; Cawkwell, 2005: appendix 3.

brandishing scimitars.<sup>7</sup> While scholars can normally comfort themselves that literature for specialists uses much more sober language, a more complicated paradigm based on a detailed study of ancient evidence is difficult to find.

Surveys of ancient warfare sometimes contain a chapter on the Persians.<sup>8</sup> The authors of these chapters are usually expert in military affairs, but usually less knowledgeable about the ancient Near East, and the short space available encourages them to lean on previous research and the most accessible sources. Some of these books divide their subject matter by periods and cultures with little cross-linking, and others assume that their job is to describe how military excellence passed from the Near East to Greece to Macedonia to Rome.<sup>9</sup> Both models tend to separate Achaemenid warfare from its broader context in Southwest Asia in the first millennium BCE.

I know of only three books dedicated to the Achaemenids at war. The first, the revised doctoral thesis of Stefan Bittner, concentrates on equipment and on Greek and Latin terminology.<sup>10</sup> It contains some witty criticism of earlier scholarship, but is still written within a classical paradigm. His picture of the Medes and Persians in Xerxes' army attempts to harmonize the *homotimoi* of the *Cyropaedia*, the monumental art which depicts some men in flowing robes and others with fitted tunics and trousers, miscellaneous Greek descriptions of foreign clothing, and the famous passage at Herodotus 7.61.<sup>11</sup> Bittner had the bad luck of finishing his dissertation just as this approach was going out of fashion in favour of one which emphasized Near Eastern evidence and took a much less trusting approach to Greek texts. Other scholars have often cited Bittner's book in lists of suggested reading, but have rarely addressed specific details. Nicholas Sekunda's short book for wargamers devoted much of its space

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<sup>7</sup> Green, 1996: 3–6 (miscellaneous tropes about the orient), 8 (Persian commissar), 79 (scimitar), 88 (purveyance, a term with medieval European connotations), 251 (“bow-carrying oriental horsemen”).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Warry, 1980; Connolly, 1981; de Souza, 2008; Hackett, 1989; Raaflaub / Rosenstein, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Delbrück already worked from this model of *translatio imperii* but it is still to be found in popular works such as Warry, 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Bittner, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Bittner, 1987: 269–271 (Henkelman, 2003: 206 n. 87, a rare comment on one of Bittner's arguments, is not kind).

to analysing soldiers' clothing and providing a rough narrative.<sup>12</sup> While it cited sources which military historians rarely read, and spread knowledge of reconstructed Old Persian military jargon, it did not transform the way scholars think about the Achaemenids at war. Perhaps the best of these books is by Duncan Head.<sup>13</sup> While also a short book for a general audience, it discusses all the major issues and types of evidence, and its assessment is always worth considering. Unfortunately, it was printed in small quantity, and few copies appear to have reached academic libraries.

Scholars with a background in classics or military history tend to be most comfortable with Greek literary evidence, and rely on others to help them with texts in other languages and with art and material remains. Often, the surveys which they cite are written by other classicists, such as Paul Rahe's article on the military background to Cunaxa, Christopher Tuplin's articles on garrisons, cavalry, and the king at war, and Nicholas Sekunda's studies of evidence from Anatolia.<sup>14</sup> Matthew Stolper's work on the Murašû archive has also been influential outside the field of Assyriology.<sup>15</sup> Most scholars with a background in classics and military history have looked to these works for broad theses, rather than engaging with the sources which they present.<sup>16</sup>

### III. Near Eastern Studies

As the first powerful, well-documented Iranian dynasty, the Achaemenids have also interested specialists in Iranian history and culture. Often, they touch on military questions in passing as part of a study of Old Iranian languages or early Iranian culture. A dedicated military study is Shahpur Shahbazi's article "Army i. Pre-Islamic Iran" in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.<sup>17</sup> Shahbazi's article begins by listing types of evidence and warning

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<sup>12</sup> Sekunda, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Head, 1992.

<sup>14</sup> Rahe, 1981; Sekunda, 1985; Sekunda, 1988b; Sekunda, 1991; Tuplin, 1987; Tuplin, 2010; Tuplin, 2011; Tuplin, 2013. Christopher Tuplin is also compiling lists of combat operations, martial imagery (Tuplin, forthcoming), references to soldiers in documents from the empire, etc. and will publish an article on militaria in the Landmark *Anabasis*. I thank him for making several of these unpublished resources available to me.

<sup>15</sup> Stolper, 1985.

<sup>16</sup> An honourable exception is Dusinger, 2013 which looks at warfare in Anatolia through the lens of archaeology.

<sup>17</sup> Shahbazi, 1986.

that they are unevenly distributed; he then has brief sections on the Avesta and on the early first millennium BCE, and long ones on the Achaemenid, Arsacid, and Sasanid periods. The section on the Achaemenid period is thorough and cites a wide range of evidence and scholarship, especially works by specialists in Iranian languages and culture which military historians are unlikely to know. He may have provided Anglophone scholars their first overview of military words in Old Iranian. On the other hand, he was obliged to leave out earlier Mesopotamian history and the whole Seleucid period for reasons of space. While that may have been the right decision for an article in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, from the perspective of Achaemenid studies it was an unfortunate choice. Focusing too much on the “Iranian” aspects of the Achaemenid empire can blur differences among Iranian cultures and similarities between Achaemenid, Mesopotamian, and Greek practices. Persian culture was influenced by both Media and Elam, and many soldiers came from areas with their own military traditions.

Another group of scholars studies texts from Babylonia and Egypt in the Achaemenid period. Many are not particularly interested in military questions, but address them whenever it seems necessary to understand the tablets. Scholars such as A. Leo Oppenheim, G. van Driel, Michael Jursa, Cornelia Wunsch, and Caroline Waerzeggers research Late Babylonian society and institutions in general. John MacGinnis and Kristin Kleber have studied military records in temple archives.<sup>18</sup> Rüdiger Schmitt, Muhammad Dandamayev, Ran Zadok, and Michael Tavernier examine Iranians and Iranian words in Babylonian sources.<sup>19</sup> Matthew Stolper’s book on the Murašû archive promotes a specific military thesis, namely that the revolt of Darius II led to a financial crisis amongst holders of fiefs.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, the tablets from Persepolis do not seem to deal with military affairs, although they do seem to mention guards or spear-bearers.<sup>21</sup> Their seals are also a valuable source for how Persian officials wished to be seen as hunters, warriors, and heroes.<sup>22</sup> Sources such as the Astronomical Diaries sometimes mention military events, and it goes without saying that

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<sup>18</sup> MacGinnis, 2012; Kleber, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> e.g. Dandamayev, 1989; Dandamayev, 1992; Schmitt’s volumes of the *Iranisches Personennamenbuch*; Tavernier, 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Stolper, 1985.

<sup>21</sup> Henkelman, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Garrison / Root, 2001; on violence in Achaemenid art in general, see Wu, 2014.

evidence from earlier periods, especially the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian, can be used to supplement sources from the Achaemenid period.<sup>23</sup>

I think that documents in Aramaic and Babylonian are the most promising sources for rethinking war in the Achaemenid empire. The scholarly infrastructure is surprisingly well developed. Scholars interested in tablet Dar. 253, for example, which records the distribution of three years' supplies to three or four horsemen, can now supplement Strassmaier's sketch with four transcriptions or translations, a short book on soldiers in Neo-Babylonian, Teispid, and Achaemenid texts by John MacGinnis, and a number of comments on specific expressions.<sup>24</sup> Scholars at German and Austrian universities have clarified many of the difficulties of the latest forms of cuneiform writing and suggested that Babylonian was a living language later than had previously been thought.<sup>25</sup> The completion of the *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* and the publication of several dictionaries and grammars have reduced the barriers to working with documents in that language.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, Aramaic and Babylonian documents provide a partial view of the situation in specific parts of the empire. That situation must also be understood in light of Late Babylonian, Judaeian, and Egyptian culture in general. Only certain aspects of military service were recorded on stone or clay. Using this evidence to tell a coherent story and integrating it with other evidence is no easy task, and one which many experienced scholars have felt unable to achieve. If progress is possible, it will likely result from dialogue between military historians, philologists, and social historians.

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<sup>23</sup> Two perspectives on the Astronomical Diary for Gaugamela can be found in Rollinger / Ruffing, 2012 and van der Speck, 2003. On earlier periods, see Hamblin, 2006, Yadin, 1963, Dezsö, 2012, Spallinger, 2005, Vidal, (ed.) 2010, MacGinnis, 2012, Linke, 2015: 292–304.

<sup>24</sup> Sketch: Strassmaier, 1892. Transcriptions or translations: Salonen, 1975: 78; Joannès, 1982: 18; Kuhrt, 2007: 825. Book: MacGinnis, 2012. A bibliography and transcription is available at <http://www.achemenet.com/en/item/?/textual-sources/texts-by-languages-and-scripts/babylonian/ebabbar-archive/1657674>.

<sup>25</sup> I think especially of Rüdiger Schmitt, of Michael Jursa and his colleagues in Vienna, and Michael P. Streck in Leipzig.

<sup>26</sup> E.g. Hoftijzer / Jonegling, 1995; Muraoka / Porten, 1998; Muraoka, 2012. Two important online resources are the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon <http://cal.huc.edu/> and the Arshama Project <http://arshama.classics.ox.ac.uk/index.html>.

Surveys of the Achaemenid empire also often contain a short discussion of warfare and military practices.<sup>27</sup> The writers of surveys have not tended to be specialists in military history, so have usually tried to stick to a few points which seemed generally accepted. Such summaries have often been useful introductions, providing a judicious selection of details and placing the military aspects in a wider social and economic context. Pierre Briant's comments were particularly lengthy and helpful. On the other hand, they are certainly no substitute for an academic monograph. Matt Waters' recent survey limited its discussion of military matters to a thousand words which alternate between philological notes, summaries of the Greek authorities, and warnings that it is hard to separate the reality from Greek stereotypes.<sup>28</sup> While each of these perspectives has something to offer, a synthesis would be desirable.

#### **IV. The Western Way of War**

At the start of this paper I noted that the Achaemenid History Workshops seemed to have little effect on writing about the Achaemenids at war. Another movement of the 1980s had a very great influence, especially on the educated public. This theory is the Western Way of War, associated with the book of the same name by Victor Davis Hanson.<sup>29</sup>

At its simplest, the Western Way of War theory states that Greek culture lead to a unique and effective way of war which later European countries and their colonies inherited. This way of war was based upon great battles between dense formations of heavily armed infantry who were politically free. Thus war is important to the study of ancient Greece because it was central to their culture, and studying ancient Greece is important to us because we inherited their culture and, in particular, their way of war. Versions of this idea can be found earlier; Aeschylus contrasts the free Greek spear and the slavish Persian bow, and Paul Rahe opposes "the infantry of the West" and "the cavalry of the east."<sup>30</sup> Yet Hanson presented it with great rhetorical art, and in the heady atmosphere of the late Cold War there were many eager to hear it.

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<sup>27</sup> E.g. Wiesehöfer, 1994: 132–139; Briant, 2002: 195–198; 340–343, 579–599, 783–800; Huyse, 2005: 90–92, Waters, 2014: 108–111.

<sup>28</sup> Waters, 2014: 108–111.

<sup>29</sup> Hanson, 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Rahe, 1981: 88.



Persians appear in two contexts in *The Western Way of War*. The first is embroidered, emotive passages which contrast the Greeks or the West with everyone else. Hanson repeatedly cites the description of how the Greeks fight which Herodotus attributes to Mardonius (Hdt. 7.9) as saying something profound about Greek and Persian warfare. Early in the book he glosses Mardonius' words as follows:

“Herodotus’ account suggests awe, or perhaps fear, in this man’s dismissal of the Greek manner of battle and the Greek desire to inflict damage whatever the costs. Perhaps he is suggesting that Mardonius knew well that these men of the West, for all their ordered squares, careful armament, and deliberate drill, were really quite irrational and therefore quite dangerous. All the various contingents of the Grand Army of Persia, with their threatening looks and noise, had a very different and predictable outlook on battle. In Herodotus’ view here, the Persians suffered from that most dangerous tendency in war: a wish to kill but not to die in the process.”<sup>31</sup>

Hanson also agrees with the Greek sources that Greek armies were usually outnumbered by foreign enemies, and he sees them sharing this disadvantage with many other “western” armies. As he puts it: “from the Three Hundred at the pass at Thermopylae, to Xenophon’s Ten Thousand in Asia Minor, to the frontier Roman garrison, the Crusaders, and European colonial troops, outnumbered Western commanders have never been dismayed by the opportunity to achieve an incredible victory through the use of superior weapons, tactics, and cohesion amongst men.”<sup>32</sup> In this context, the Persians serve as a symbol of all foreigners who dared to stand up to “Westerners” in battle, and their gruesome deaths are used to glorify the heroes.

The second context where Hanson mentions the Persians is in discussions of specific problems in Greek battle, where Persian exempla are used alongside Greek, Macedonian, and Roman ones. Thus he wonders why outnumbered Greek armies did not plant the butts of their spears in the ground to receive a charge as the Persians at Mycale did; when considering whether or not Greek soldiers literally pushed their enemies he quotes Xenophon’s description of how Egyptians used their tall shields to push; he mentions Napoleonic and Persian parallels for the Greek practice

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<sup>31</sup> Hanson, 2000: 10.

<sup>32</sup> Hanson, 2000: 15 (with the crew of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, one is tempted to ask “what, never?”).

of viewing the bodies of dead enemies after the battle.<sup>33</sup> These passages are written in a cool, objective style and assume that all ancient armies are comparable. Yet Hanson is not interested in going beyond Greek and Latin sources for ancient armies. The body of his book does not cite a single text or artefact from the ancient Near East, and the only books on Near Eastern warfare in his short bibliography of 120 items are three surveys.<sup>34</sup> While Hanson cites specific passages and specialized research to support his statements about the Greeks, he relies on loose references to Greek literature and introductory works by modern scholars to support his views on other cultures.

In the past decade Hanson's ideas about Greek warfare have come under intense criticism, but it would be foolish to underestimate their influence.<sup>35</sup> Hanson's CV contains a long list of collaborations, book chapters, and edited collections with famous Anglophone historians of ancient warfare.<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Parker and John Keegan, two other military historians who wrote for a large audience, accepted Hanson's thesis. Almost anyone interested in ancient warfare encounters the Western Way of War theory early in their education. Today's specialists in Greek warfare often disagree with Hanson's conclusions, but they usually accept his assumption that Greek warfare should be understood in isolation from or opposition to warfare in other cultures.<sup>37</sup> While a few scholars have tried to take a wider view, especially in the last decade, evidence from other cultures has tended to be kept on the margins of the debate. While many

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<sup>33</sup> Hanson, 2000: 136 (Mycale), 174 (pushing), 202 (viewing the enemy dead).

<sup>34</sup> Yadin, 1963; Harmand, 1973; Ferrill 1997.

<sup>35</sup> Some recent works which explicitly reject Hanson's ideas include Lynn, 2008: 12–27; Van Wees 2004; and Brouwers, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Hanson (ed.), 1991; Parker (ed.) 1995; Raaflaub / Rosenstein (eds.), 1999; Sabin / van Wees / Whitby (eds.), 2007; Kagan / Viggiano (eds.), 2013.

<sup>37</sup> While the *Cambridge Economic History of the Greek and Roman World* discusses places as far east as Mesopotamia and as early as the beginning of the Iron Age, the recent *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* takes its title very literally. Out of twelve chapters on early Greek warfare in Kagan / Viggiano (eds.), 2013, only two pay significant attention to the situation in other cultures, one arguing that “the armed adventurers of the eighth and seventh centuries BC [in eastern kingdoms] may have been the true progenitors of Classical Greek civilization” (Hale, 2013: 191), the other that “in the military aspects of Greek social culture [...] Near Eastern influence can be ruled out almost entirely” (Raaflaub, 2013: 103). A better understanding of Greeks, not of hoplites in general, remains the goal of this research.

ancient writers and artists saw hoplites, phalanxes, and citizen-soldiers amongst both Greek and non-Greek nations, most scholars today prefer to focus on Greek examples.<sup>38</sup>

## V. War and the State

In 1985 Arthur Ferrill proposed a very different theory about the relationship between Greek and Southwest Asian warmaking.<sup>39</sup> His book was relatively short, lightly referenced, and based on secondary literature, but its central idea is worthy of serious thought. Ferrill observed that weapons for use against humans, fortifications, and pictures of combat between groups appear in the Neolithic, and that by the third millennium BCE warfare in Egypt and the Near East was clearly organized and sophisticated. Thus war has a long history before Classical Greece, but Greece was cut off from this tradition by the collapse at the end of the Bronze Age.<sup>40</sup> The Greeks perfected armies centred around simple formations of heavily armed infantry, but these armies had many limitations. In the fourth century some Greek and Macedonian generals adopted the basic elements of Near Eastern warfare, producing armies which were about as sophisticated and effective as those of the Napoleonic Wars. Ferrill concludes that:

“Historians have often ironically remarked that the Persian army defending the empire against Alexander’s invasions in the fourth century BC contained in the centre of its line a Greek hoplite phalanx, implying that the ancient Near East had learned an important military lesson from

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<sup>38</sup> A full discussion of hoplites, phalanxes, and citizen soldiers who are difficult to call Greeks in the first millennium BCE could easily fill a book. See for example the various peoples armed “like Hellenes” in Hdt. 7.61–99 (some of whom moderns call Greeks, and others who they definitely do not), the ὀπλίται Αἰγύπτιοι of Xen. An. 1.8.9 and ὀπλίται Ἀσσύριοι of Xen. An. 7.8.15, the apparent use of characters armed like Egyptians or “like the Persians in pictures” (but not called hoplites) to teach lessons about combat between Greek hoplites in Xen. Cyr., the *kardakes* at Issos who Arrian calls ὀπλίται (Arr., Anab. 2.8.6), the πολιτικὸν στρατιωτικὸν of Sidon at Diodorus 16.42.2, the Nereid Monument at Xanthus (Anderson, 1970: 34–36), the siege scene on the Amathus Bowl (e.g. Myres, 1933, Hale, 2013), and the paintings of warriors with greaves, crested helmets, Argive shields, and forward-curved swords at Tatarlı (e.g. Summerer, 2007). While this evidence could certainly be interpreted in different ways, specialists in Greek warfare rarely venture an opinion in writing.

<sup>39</sup> Ferrill, 1997.

<sup>40</sup> Ferrill, 1997: 98–99.

the Greeks. Much more ironic is the fact that Alexander's army owed a vastly greater debt to Persia than the Persian army to Greece.<sup>41</sup>

In Ferrill's view, classical Greek armies were like Archilochus' hedgehog with its one good trick (fr. 201 West), but they became most effective when they learned from the Persian fox with its many tricks. Although other writers had suggested that the Persian invasions forced the Greeks to develop a more sophisticated way of fighting, Ferrill developed this idea at length and backed it with knowledge of warfare in the ancient Near East.<sup>42</sup>

Ferrill's thesis is subversive to the Western Way of War theory, since it implies that the split between Greek and Near Eastern warfare was a temporary accident and that Greek soldiers became more effective when they learned from the Near East. Hanson included Ferrill's book in the short bibliography of *The Western Way of War* but did not engage with it explicitly. He did agree with Ferrill that Xerxes' invasion confronted simple, specialized Greek armies with a much more sophisticated and versatile way of war, but his whole book is opposed to the idea that modern warfare owes more to Alexander and the Ancient Near East than to Archaic Greece.<sup>43</sup> A handful of scholars from other disciplines, such as Gwynne Dyer, have taken Ferrill's approach, but very few specialists in ancient history.<sup>44</sup> Historians sometimes suggest Persian or Punic influence on Greek warfare, but rarely develop the idea at length. Nor has Ferrill's book achieved the popular success of Hanson's, although it did receive a second edition.

## VI. Overview and Critique

One hundred years after Eduard Meyer, most writing about the Achaemenid army is still centred around Greek and Latin literature. Scholars with a classical background have diverse views, but they still ask questions driven by their classical sources, and tend to use other kinds of evidence in support and to keep it on the edge of their arguments. On the other hand, scholars from other disciplines often touch on military questions,

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<sup>41</sup> Ferrill, 1997: 33.

<sup>42</sup> "Other writers" e.g. Adcock, 1957: 11, 12.

<sup>43</sup> Partial agreement with Ferrill: Hanson, 2000: 37; distaste for Alexander and the Roman emperors, Hanson, 2000: xviii, xviii (many other expressions of distaste for Alexander and the later Romans are scattered throughout his writings).

<sup>44</sup> Dyer, 2006.

but rarely feel comfortable writing a synthesis or rejecting the frameworks provided by classicists. Scholarship on war in the Achaemenid empire is fragmented, without an overarching research framework which brings scholarship from different disciplines together. It would be unfair to criticize booklets for wargamers, chapters in edited collections, or surveys for failing to create such a framework, and most such works achieve what they set out to do. Yet the absence of more detailed, specialized literature which considers military questions in depth outside the narrow framework of classical literature is a serious problem.

The Achaemenid army is usually presented as a childless orphan; that is, it is described in isolation from earlier armies in the same region, and assumed to have had no influence on Greek, Macedonian, or Roman practices. This trope can be found as early as Hans Delbrück, whose *Geschichte der Kriegskunst* begins with Marathon and ignores the east from Gaugamela to Carrhae. Delbrück wrote in a context where the art of war was seen as the art of fighting great battles, and felt that of the sources available to him only Greek and Latin narratives from Herodotus onwards allowed him to write this sort of history for the ancient world. Historians today take a much broader view of military history, and few would be willing to defend the idea that history begins with Herodotus or that Alexander and his successors simply replaced Persian practices with Macedonian ones. Assyriologists have learned a great deal about warfare in the ancient Near East, and many scholars have noticed hints that Persian military practices influenced the Greeks.<sup>45</sup> Many scholars today believe that changes in dynasty did not mark sudden cultural breaks, and that the Persian elite borrowed from all the cultures in their empire.<sup>46</sup> Yet what this meant in military terms has not yet been explored in detail.

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<sup>45</sup> E.g. Anderson, 1970: 23 (cuirass with shoulder flaps possibly borrowed from Egypt); Anderson, 1970: 150; Sekunda, 1992: 25; Sekunda, 1988c: 43 (Xenophon proposed that cavalry adopt Persian equipment or skills); Wheeler / Strauss, 2007: 238 (Athenian besiegers imitated Persian engines and atrocities); Rollinger, 2013 (Greeks and Macedonians learn to cross rivers on inflated skins). Many of these ideas await their first serious treatment, whether favourable, undecided, or unfavourable.

<sup>46</sup> Specialists in Babylonian history (e.g. Warezegg, 2011: 59) use the term “the long sixth century” to describe the period from the destruction of the Assyrian kingdom to the end of archives in Xerxes’ second regnal year without reference to dynastic changes. Three recent volumes which look at the relationship between the Achaemenids and earlier states and cultures are Lanfranchi / Roaf / Rollinger, 2003; Henkelman, 2008; and Álvarez-Mon / Garrison, 2011.

It is unfortunate that several broad works were written before the a new approach had been developed at the Achaemenid History workshops, and that few scholars have imitated Sekunda and Tuplin and considered military questions in depth. The philosophical difficulties are considerable. For example, defining “the Achaemenid army” or the scope of “Achaemenid army studies” or “Achaemenid military history” is not as easy as in some other societies. The Romans of the early Empire have left us a clear understanding of the concepts “war” and “soldier” which researchers can use to decide which events and individuals belong in one category and which do not. Soldiers had distinctive dress and manners, they were listed on rolls and received pay, they often lived apart from their civilian neighbours in distinctive compounds, and they fought for an *imperator* or the *senatus populusque Romanus*. The Achaemenids seem to have drawn on diverse communities and institutions for military manpower, and many individuals seem to have moved several times between the civil and military spheres over the course of their lives. Sources from western Anatolia suggest that distinctions between public and private war, and between foreign and civil war, were difficult to draw. Many of the terms which seem to refer to soldiers in the languages of the empire are difficult to understand. Focusing on ethnic Persians or on royal troops might help to narrow the scope, but would also exclude a large fraction of what limited evidence survives.<sup>47</sup>

## VII. A Sketch of an Alternative Approach

While deconstructing the assumptions and goals of previous research helps explain the state of the literature, it does not by itself lead to better research. Making these assumptions explicit encourages scholars to consider whether they are correct and how one might decide which were most likely to be correct, but it does not summon new research from nothing. How might scholars study war in the Achaemenid empire with the same rigour which they apply to other aspects of Achaemenid history?

First, war in the Achaemenid empire should be put in the context of war in Southwest Asia during the last three millennia BCE. Egyptologists and Assyriologists have published a variety of surveys which simultaneously enable the non-specialist to use such comparative evidence and oblige him

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<sup>47</sup> Experiments with such an approach include Briant, 1999: 108; Sekunda, 1985, 1988b, 1991; Tuplin, 2010: 107–112.

or her to be aware of it.<sup>48</sup> I think that most experts would agree that the Achaemenid empire cannot just be understood from a Greek perspective, or a Mesopotamian perspective, or an Iranian perspective, but that knowledge of all of these cultures has something to contribute. While this is challenging, it is also hopeful, since it suggests that the inherent limits and difficulties of each of these types of evidence might be overcome.

Second, more attention needs to be paid to less traditional sorts of evidence. To date, writers have tended to base their understanding of military affairs on Greek and Latin literature, and to a lesser extent monumental art and vase paintings. While seals, royal inscriptions, legal documents, funerary monuments, and remains of weapons are all difficult sources, they have been studied much less intensively than the classical literary evidence has. The flowering of research into the Achaemenid empire has made other types of evidence more accessible to the non-specialist. Sometimes a comment in a Greek source is best understood in light of a Hittite relief, or a receipt for bricks from Babylonia.<sup>49</sup> The use of other types of evidence is certainly well established in Greek and Roman military history.

Third, Greek and Latin literature should be read according to the critical perspective developed at the Achaemenid History Workshops. Scholars in this tradition accept that Greek and Latin literature is crucial for understanding the Achaemenid empire, but they are intensely aware that this tradition was shaped by misunderstanding, bias, and the hindsight of book-buyers in later periods who ‘knew’ that the story of the Achaemenid empire ended with Alexander. Much work on the Achaemenid army stitches together passages from Herodotus, Xenophon, and the Alexander historians without asking hard questions about why these authors say what they do, what assumptions we are making when we interpret them, and whether it would be possible to cite different passages to tell a different story. While finding a balance between excessive credulity and postmodern agnosticism is difficult, it is necessary for writing about any area of ancient history.

Two types of scholarship on ancient warfare might provide models. The first is Ferrill’s “war and the state” approach and its insights that war in many ancient societies was comparable and that richer, larger-scale societies tend to have more sophisticated military institutions.

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<sup>48</sup> E.g. Beale, 1992 (*non vidi*); Redford, 2003; Spalinger, 2005; Darnell / Manassa, 2007; Howard, 2011; MacGinnis, 2012; Dezsö, 2012; Linke, 2015: 292–304.

<sup>49</sup> Tallis, 2010; Stolper, 1992.

While specific examples remain to be proved, it is certainly plausible that changes in warfare west of the Aegean recapitulated developments which had occurred much earlier in the countries to the east. The other is Roman Army Studies.<sup>50</sup> Students of the Roman army in the early empire also study an imperial army, and one which produced many kinds of evidence in peace and in war. They expect new research to show awareness of a variety of kinds of evidence, even if a given paper is likely to focus on one. They also organize conferences and write handbooks to introduce newcomers to their field and keep up to date. While an auxiliary diploma and a cuneiform ration ticket are different, the methods which help to interpret one may help with the other. Specialists in the Roman army also have a long tradition of analysing change, continuity, and influence from neighbouring cultures or literary models. Careful attention to this research might suggest solutions to some of the fundamental methodological problems, and help avoid lines of thought which proved unhelpful in other areas of research.

Finding a better way to think about war in the Achaemenid empire will not be quick or easy. The sheer variety and difficulty of the sources demands that scholars from a variety of disciplines (and with a variety of professional perspectives) take part. Historical research is governed by heuristics not fixed rules, and only experimentation with different methods and debates between researchers with different assumptions can reveal the best way forward. The history of other areas of research suggests that even if a community of scholars began working on the problem tomorrow, it would be decades before a new synthesis appeared. My own work will, at best, contribute to a conversation which might lead to such a synthesis.<sup>51</sup> Yet sources and methods are available, and a better understanding of the Achaemenid army would help us understand both the empire itself and a common human activity in a particular time and place. Although the search will be difficult, it is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the Melammu symposia.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> For an introduction see James, 2002. One good example of Roman army scholars' willingness to break free from simple ethnic oppositions is Sanz, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> My doctoral dissertation (Manning, 2018) will form the basis of a monograph which will appear (*dis voluntibus*) in 2020.

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Rollinger, 2015.



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