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Philip Matyszak, *Legionary: The Roman Soldier's (Unofficial) Manual*. London/New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009. Pp. 208. ISBN 978-0-500-25151-5.

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Presented as a “manual” for aspiring legionaries of the year A.D. 100, this is indeed a handy, informative, and up-to-date reference work on the legions of the Principate, intended, at least in part, as a resource for studious re-enactors. So, first things first: if you buy only one “how-to” book next holiday season on the subject of joining a defunct military organization, look no further than this entertaining and well-produced book. Yet there is a broader appeal here: ably synthesizing a great deal of information, *Legionary* is descriptive rather than truly prescriptive. It is not a “make your own armor” book, but a compendium of most everything that historians know about the details and routines that filled the days and careers of Roman legionaries. Perhaps because dedicated re-enactment of Roman military activities is a largely British avocation in the English-speaking world, and because the referent history is safely apolitical, the book’s interest in re-enactment lends a quaintly antiquarian tinge to the Roman army that will not put off the non-emulative reader, even one who might experience discomfort, condescending bewilderment, or outright fear when reading about ardent re-enactors of modern wars.

Philip Matyszak, an Oxford-educated historian and author of several other popular books on the ancient world,¹ is an engaging writer, able to maintain an irreverent, repartee-style of prose without its becoming a tiresome gimmick, and to be insouciant without dumbing down the material. *Legionary* combines short sections of text with numerous high-quality illustrations (the “it’s A.D. 100” conceit is not rigorously kept up—no faux-papyrus or previous owner’s blood and *garum* stains, but many photographs and references to later events and works). There are frequent addresses to the would-be legionary, including sections headed “Briefings” and “What to Expect.” Some of the informal structural elements, such as occasional checklists and small inset illustrations surrounded by descriptive text, are well done. The handbook naturally centers on the legionary’s career: reader-addressees follow their path from enlistment to discharge and death, from recruits’ letters of recommendation to veterans’ epitaphs. Useful sections include a potted history of the army, a brief identification of each individual legion (ca. A.D. 100), a guide to Rome’s enemies and to auxiliary units. The most thoroughly thumbed chapters will surely be those on equipment, training, camp life, and the campaign; the final three cover siege warfare, battle, and life after discharge.

It’s all good fun, and honorable—the sort of popular history book that works in scores of short primary source quotations, and not merely the more familiar bits from the literary sources. There are few demands on the reader in terms of previous knowledge or extended concentration (the cleverish neo-Latin epigrams are translated at the foot of the page,² and the text is broken up by both illustrations and recurring sword and shield boss motifs). Matyszak adeptly chooses the sort of evocative primary texts that make the study of the Imperial Army so fascinating: a document discharging a soldier for poor eyesight, papyri discussing petty cash and uniform requisitions, plaintive letters home, and excerpts from the Vindolanda tablets mentioning socks and beer. Poignant “real life” details aside, this gentle introduction to the Roman army’s habit of voluminous documentation conveys important history without being oppressively didactic. While not a serious scholarly treatment of military culture or the mechanics of battle, it is a decent introduction to those subjects and other details of the Roman military experience. The stage-by-stage organization high-

1. See the following, all published by Thames & Hudson (London/New York): *Chronicle of the Roman Republic: The Rulers of Ancient Rome from Romulus to Augustus* (2003), *The Enemies of Rome: From Hannibal to Attila the Hun* (2004), *The Sons of Caesar: Imperial Rome’s First Dynasty* (2006), *Ancient Rome on Five Denarii a Day* (2007), *Ancient Athens on Five Drachmas a Day* (2008).

2. Classical Latin terms are mostly faithfully reproduced, but an unfortunately conspicuous blemish is the phrase “De Res Militari,” repeated nine times—in bold—as the heading of boxed inserts on pp. 51, 69, 93, 113, 127, 148, 163, 181, 195.

lights information that would otherwise have to be assiduously stalked in bigger books and reference works. Although there is a useful glossary, the index is limited to proper nouns. Designed for flipping through, not dissecting, the book is an enjoyable blend of dense detail and jaunty prose.

Legionary is in many ways an able updating of G.R. Watson's still very readable *The Roman Soldier* or Graham Webster's *The Roman Imperial Army*,³ but, lacking footnotes or references, it will frustrate scholars bent on tracing some fact or insight. Yet the book is a convenient aid to serious pondering on the Roman army and it exemplifies both the strengths and limitations of making use of the "hands-on" insights of meticulous re-enactors (a.k.a. "experimental archaeologists"). The concrete non-combat aspects of Roman military service—all that marching, digging, and camp-construction—in some cases obviously derive from the experiences of modern people who have actually tried to replicate them. At the same time, the sections on strategy, tactics, and the combat experience are skillful distillations of the scholarly literature.

As Matyszak acknowledges, his account of the army in wartime relies heavily on the work of Adrian Goldsworthy,⁴ the most influential post-Keegan historian of the Roman army. His affectedly rough-and-ready summary of Roman operational tendencies is more cogent than many recent technical studies, and his attention to the psychological dimension of Roman warfare as a calculated performance of limitless power and relentless will is in tune with the best recent scholarship. Despite the brevity of each section and the blow-by-blow account of siege and battle, the book reflects the improvements brought by the "Face of Battle" school to the traditionalist's (and the re-enactor's) habits of standardizing the army, scanting the significance of psychology, and obsessing over physical detail. While details of organization and equipment dominate in the early chapters, the trained and kitted-out legionary is also treated to an accurate, if flip-pant, account of the hardships and terrors to come.

Legionary works best when it violates the A.D. 100 timeframe and feels all the more stuffed with information for its tongue-in-cheek anachronisms. More problematic, however, is the way the handbook plays broadly to more general expectations of the military. The humor rests largely on tropes more appropriate to popular military history than to the Roman army specifically. Recruitment is a lark: "Rome Needs You!" (6). Battle too: "Remember that ... wild sword swings are hazardous to everyone around ... keep it simple, keep it stabby" (174). Even your tombstone can be fun: "You were one of the most feared and formidable people in the world—a legionary of Rome. You did it—so flaunt it" (192). A more substantive example of the book's breezy style:

A legionary has little interaction with the top brass of the legion. A good basic rule is to avoid anyone with a transverse helmet crest or a pretty ribbon tied under the pectorals of his breastplate. The ribbons designate officers, and about the best that can be said for these men is that they do their share of the fighting, and die at the same rate as ordinary soldiers. Centurions too are expected to show inspiring valour, and as their distinctive crests make them conspicuous targets, the enemy kill them in goodly numbers—a fact which causes most legionaries little distress... (89).

That "uniform" dress and insignia are anachronistic or that there is no established connection between centurions' crests and their death rate, is not the real problem. Matyszak is playing to the post-World War One contempt for the "top brass," and, perhaps, hinting at the darker history of intra-unit violence in Vietnam. Such touchstones instantly translate Roman distinctions of rank into a familiar framework that emphasizes the reader's assigned role of would-be legionary. But they also smuggle comparative history into a book ostensibly focused on Roman imperial legions. Drawing analogies to officer-hating Tommies or GIs weakens the historical distinctiveness of the Roman soldier.

Casual references to modern war make the legionary seem, as J.E. Lendon has observed, "essentially generic,"⁵ badly distorting Roman culture. "Officers" were members of a formally distinct social class, and

3. Respectively: Ithaca, NY: Cornell U Pr, 1969, and (3rd ed.) 1985; rpt. Norman: U Oklahoma Pr, 1998.

4. See, e.g., *The Roman Army at War: 100 BC–AD 200* (Oxford: Clarendon Pr, 1996), *The Punic Wars* (London: Cassell, 2000), *Cannae* (London: Cassell, 2001), *The Complete Roman Army* (NY: Thames & Hudson, 2003).

5. "The Roman Army Now," *Classical Journal* 99 (2004) 449.

what legionaries thought of that distinction is unknowable: not a single scrap of autobiographical writing—other than fragmentary letters and career inscriptions—documents the mindset of the “ordinary legionary.” Papering over this gap with general impressions gleaned from thousands of published memoirs and autobiographies, many of them twentieth-century, cannot replace hard evidence. The legionary knew his commander might or might not possess basic military knowledge along with his senatorial status. This is quite different from a Tommy’s expectation that his commanding general might be an upper-class twit of the year. As for combat itself, though some centurions who led from the front and sometimes died at four or five times the rate of their men may well have been hated, it is likely that most were respected for enacting a particular sort of competitive, heroic ethos.

Whatever the broad similarities to modern military culture—masculinity expressed through physical courage, leaders admired for conspicuous bravery—the performance of combat leadership was deeply rooted in aspects of Roman culture profoundly alien to twentieth- or twenty-first-century experience. Matyszak writes that the first man up an enemy wall may well receive his *corona muralis* posthumously (160), but Romans did not award posthumous decorations. This is a rare but telling error. Realizing that the Romans gave cash bonuses to their best fighters yet did not officially commemorate dead heroes is an important step toward recognizing the differences between “us” and them.

The appealing jocular tone of the book is laid aside from time to time, for instance, to describe various foreign peoples in Chapter VI, “People Who Will Want To Kill You,” or to detail technical aspects of siege warfare in a scholarly fashion that would presumably bewilder a first-century A.D. teenager, who, likewise, would not need to be told that weather and the rhythms of agriculture tend to limit military campaigns to the summer and early fall. But it would be unfair to criticize *Legionary* for not being a companion volume to *Peasant: Everything the Ancient Military Recruit Would Be Familiar With*. Nevertheless, we must address the problem of the generic and the particular: intense interest in one era of history too often assumes such a thing as “military history,” rather than many military histories, each specific to a particular time and place. The study of the Roman legion is a sub-field not of some imaginary “military history,” coherent and continuous, but of the surrounding cultural and historical context.

Of course, *Legionary* is not intended either to cover broader Roman culture or to conduct comparative military history, though its prevailing tone implies readers with a special enthusiasm for military terminology, technology, and costume. But armies are meant for killing, and Roman legionaries were recruited and trained, organized and equipped to project Roman power. The book’s light tone vanishes completely just when you, the legionary, are about to perform your role in meting out punishment to those unwilling to accept Roman rule. So it is that, when we come to the aftermath of a prolonged siege, the language is suddenly subdued and detached: “Such circumstances mean that by the time they have taken the city, the self-control of the soldiers is understandably frayed. Ghastly things happen during the sack of a city, but a wise general will let it go on for hours...” (164). It would be more consistent with Matyszak’s high level of scholarship and attention to detail, if the “manual” instead read: “You’ve suffered quite a bit during the siege, and maybe seen some friends killed. Besides, only craven cowards refuse to come out and fight like men. At this point, you will take personal revenge (and enhance the effectiveness of future Roman surrender ultimatums) by killing anyone within the city and by participating in the mass rape of women and children. They will be enslaved if they survive—so do try to keep future profits in mind. Remember, it’s a well-established custom of war that any military-age males be killed when the resisting city is taken!”

Matyszak does not ignore historical realities. Slavery and slaughter receive due mention and inset quotes refer to a specific massacre and the habit of atrocity. But the sudden shift in tonal distance between reader and legionary gives the feeling of reality ignored or at least avoided. Of course, this historical/ethical blind spot is common to the whole genre of popular military books.

Aside from this problem, acute only during the discussion of the sack, *Legionary* is a good, if quirky, not especially original⁶ introduction to the study of the Roman army. Matyszak includes as much complexity and subtlety as advisable in a book aimed at an enthusiast readership. Adopting a novel mode of presentation is a good way to scan for the kernel of a new idea in well-tilled ground. And, too, beyond its content, the handy 8x5-inch physical format (easy to tuck into the pack before strapping to the *furca*) will make this handsome and solid book (a rare thing nowadays) even more desirable to its target audience. It is a handbook built to survive being repeatedly flung by a grizzled *princeps prior* in the general direction of hapless *munifices*. *Legionary* is pleasantly effective in building or refurbishing a knowledge-hoard of Roman military nomenclature and technical detail—the sort of trivia every war buff delights in, whether openly or in secret.

6. Much in Matyszak's book is familiar from the paintings of Peter Connolly (a dozen or so are reproduced in color on pp. 81–88), the drawings accompanying the works of Adrian Goldsworthy (note 4 above), and the meticulous reconstructions of the Ermine Street Guard <www.miwsr.com/rd/1003.htm> — see eighteen color photographs on pp. 136–44.