British Journal for Military History

Volume 6, Issue 1, March 2020

Review of *Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East 401-330 BCE* by Jeffrey Rop

Hubert James Keener

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 19 March 2020

Citation: Hubert James Keener, 'Review of *Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East 401-330 BCE* by Jeffrey Rop', *British Journal for Military History*, 6.1 (2020), pp. 68-69.

www.bjmh.org.uk

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Jeffrey Rop, *Greek Military Service in the Ancient Near East 401-330* BCE. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xxviii + 265pp. ISBN 978-1108499507 (hardcover). Price £75.

In this revised version of his dissertation (completed at Pennsylvania State University, 2017) Jeffrey Rop seeks to assess the service of Greek military forces in Persia and Egypt during the final seven decades of the Achaemenid Empire (401-330 BCE). The Greek sources responsible for most of our knowledge on the topic portray Greek hoplites as mercenaries highly sought after throughout the ancient Near East (aNE) for their superior value as heavy infantry. They also portray the Persian military as in decline and heavily reliant upon Greek military aid. This view, which Rop (following Pierre Briant) calls "the Greek thesis," remains influential. Rop seeks to challenge the Greek thesis and replace it with a more accurate alternative. In what follows I will summarize his argument and then assess its coherence and persuasiveness broadly and tentatively. The question of whether Rop succeeds in his reassessment of the many fine details that combine to support his overarching conclusions lies beyond the scope of this review.

Rop's thesis runs as follows: Neither Persia nor Egypt were dependent upon Greek "mercenaries" for success, nor were the Greek hoplites or generals notably superior to Persian infantry and leadership. Rather, these Near Eastern empires hired Greeks as part of broader political alliances and reciprocal *xenia* (*ξενια*) relationships to supplement their forces. Greeks served the King or Pharaoh as political actors often highly loyal to their allies, not as opportunistic mercenaries desperate for pay. Furthermore, Greek naval and marine forces, not infantry, were especially valued by both Persians and Egyptians at several key junctures.

Rop develops his thesis by closely examining, in chronological order: the failed rebellion of Cyrus the younger (chapters 2 and 3); various engagements from 400-360 BC (chapter 4); the revolt of Artabazus (chapter 5); the recapture of Egypt by Persia (chapter 6); and the Macedonian invasion and ultimate conquest of Persia (chapters 7 and 8). He seeks to avoid the pitfall of dismissing the ancient Greek sources as biased out of hand without offering arguments for rejecting them. As a result, the strength of Rop's investigation lies in its combination of close literary analysis of the sources with a keen strategic and tactical assessment of the conflicts involved.

For example, in chapter two he evaluates Xenophon's *Anabasis* carefully against other relevant texts and evidence relating to Xenophon's Greek forces serving with Cyrus the Younger at Cunaxa. He argues persuasively that Xenophon misleadingly employs a variety of literary embellishments to portray himself and the Greek forces in the

best possible light. Xenophon uses focalization by describing in depth the Greek units and their activities while omitting details about other units in order to imply that the hoplites' actions were more consequential and successful than they were. He also uses tropes, portraying, a) Cyrus the Younger as a tragic advisor to absolve both Cyrus and the Greek hoplites of blame for Cyrus' loss; and b) the hoplites as dynamic subordinates to exaggerate their significance. Rop also analyses the strategy and tactics at Cunaxa, arguing convincingly—often on grounds of evidence internal to the *Anabasis*—that the battle offers no evidence for the superiority of the Greek infantry. Rather, it "reveals . . . that their ability to contribute positively was heavily circumstantial" and not very consequential.

The rest of the book shows how our Greek sources have employed focalization and literary tropes to skew the narrative in favour of the Greeks in the retelling of many conflicts. His military analysis similarly argues that the actual contributions of Greeks serving in the aNE, especially Greek heavy infantry, were neither particularly significant nor superior to that of their peers. The one exception to this rule, he argues, are the Greek naval forces, which seem to have been especially valued and valuable.

Rop argues his thesis cogently and persuasively. Yet it is built upon the accumulation of many smaller probabilistic conclusions, especially when it comes to his military analysis. His full argument, therefore, will have to be assessed one point at a time by a thorough consideration of each engagement, political maneuver, tactical decision, etc. Was the Greek contribution at Cunaxa truly insignificant? Were Darius's decisions at Issus and Gaugamela in fact competent, and not cowardly as the Greek sources allege? As *Greek Service* makes its impact, other specialists will need to evaluate Rop's proposed answers to these questions and many more like them if his thesis is to carry the day.

Although the book is not overly jargon-laden, and there are maps and figures to aid the reader, non-specialist readers seeking to learn more about Greek or aNE military history will need to commit to a careful reading to do so.

HUBERT JAMES KEENER
Independent Scholar, USA

DOI 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v6i1.1363