

Jeffrey Rop, *Greek military service in the ancient Near East, 401–330 BCE*. Cambridge & New York, Cambridge University Press, 2019, xxvi + 265 p., ISBN 9781108499507, USD 99.99.

This book is a revised version of the author’s doctoral thesis “All the King’s Greeks: mercenaries, *poleis*, and empires in the fourth century BCE”, defended in 2013 at Pennsylvania State University, which I enthusiastically used in my own recently completed thesis on archaic Greek mercenaries.¹ The reason for my enthusiastic approach was that it advanced two main conclusions that I also reached, although analysing a different period of Greek military service in the Near East: 1. the reason for the conspicuous employment of Greek soldiers in the Oriental armies was not their purported overwhelming military superiority, as thought by most modern scholars who gave credit to Greek and Latin classical writers; 2. political alliances that occurred in an international system based on numerous individual ties of reciprocity and patronage played a significant role in the recruitment of Greek mercenaries, which was not dealt on purely economic terms.

In this revised version of his thesis, Rop underscores much better than in its previous form, from the very beginning of the first chapter (“The Greek Thesis”, p. 1–29), that these two hypotheses are the objectives of his work. Subsequently, in the introductory section of his book, Rop explains with higher clarity, but with less detail than in his doctoral thesis, his two ideas.

Greek troops were not militarily superior to their Oriental counterparts and the Persian empire never became dependent on Greek mercenaries, as maintained by the supporters of the so-called ‘Greek Thesis’, a designation coined by the great student of the Persian Empire who Pierre Briant was. The modern ‘Greek Thesis’ is nothing more than the result of the too-big reliance of modern scholars on univocal sources dominated by the Greek propaganda of the late 5th and 4th century BC and the heavily entrenched stereotypes of

¹ Iancu, 2018. This review was written shortly after I had defended my dissertation and Rop’s book had been published, but it failed to appear earlier in another journal that faced some unfavourable circumstances. I am all the more grateful to *IJLS* for accepting it.

later Greek and Latin writers, whose most illustrative example seems to be Diodorus of Sicily. This modern misinterpretation of historical phenomena and events is explainable, given the absence of relevant Persian and Egyptian sources and the extensive use made by Classical writers of literary devices such as: focalization – the role played in the events by Eastern commanders and troops is mostly ignored, the focus being instead on the deeds of the Greeks; the Tragic Advisor trope – Greek commanders are pictured as always giving good advice to their Eastern employers, that would have brought victory or at least avoid crushing defeat, but as they do not receive enough credit, the battles are lost; consequently, blame for failure is seldom put on Greeks; the Dynamic Subordinate trope – Eastern victories are depicted as being gained mostly or exclusively due to the astute plans of Hellenic generals and the brave and competent actions of their troops (p. 9–18).

Secondly, the massive employment of Greeks in the Persian and Egyptian armies of the 4th century BC has never been a solely military and economic phenomenon, instead was hugely driven by politics and, in fact, it was a feature of the Eastern Mediterranean international system of that period. Starting from Gabriel Herman's work on *xenia*,² Rop contends that a significant number of enrolments made by Western Anatolian satraps and Egyptian pharaohs in the Aegean were done by exploiting personal links with influential Greek citizens of the most powerful Hellenic states, which were depicted by the Greeks as ritualized friendships, but were probably considered by their Oriental counterparts as typical relations of patronage. Following suggestions derived from Michael Weiskopf,³ Rop maintains that the frequent recruitment of Greek soldiers by the Persian satraps of the Hellespontine Phrygia, Lydia, and Caria does not show an increased dependency of the Persian empire on Greek soldiers (and indeed, satraps outside Anatolia or the Great King rarely recruited Greeks on their own) but on the contrary, testifies for the expanded Persian control over the Aegean. Furthermore, as those satraps were typically competing against each other and each had links to different Greek cities, the Great King was able to kill two birds with one stone: he was never in peril of facing a united opposition of his subordinates, like in the singular case of Cyrus the Young, and he always could decisively influence the balance of power in Greece by favouring one option or another. Taking advantage of his control over the internal Persian and the external Greek situation in the Aegean, the Great King was thus able to pursue his main goal in the West: the

² Herman, 1987.

³ Weiskopf, 1989.

reconquest of Egypt. On the opposite side, the Egyptian kings entered this game of patronage of the Greek cities, not only to supplement their armed forces, which were lower in numbers compared to those of their enemies, but also to open another front for the Persians in the Eastern Mediterranean and to deflect part of the pressure on their realm. Therefore, Rop concludes that Greek armies were recruited by Persian and Egyptian overlords not for their hypothetical overwhelming military superiority, but due to a mix of political calculus (the main reason), geographic proximity, financial expediency, and expert knowledge as sailors and marines (p. 19–26). This observation makes the author doubt the very mercenary nature of the Greek soldiers employed by Eastern powers: “I argue that the Greeks fighting for the Egyptians and Persians were political agents, whether they were officially recognized as such or not, who served within the context of formal and informal international alliances. Characterizing their activity as mercenary is anachronistic, inaccurate, and, most importantly, obscures some of the strongest evidence of foreign political influence in Greece throughout the fourth century.” (p. 19)

The rest of the book is a vivid discussion of the main military events of the 4th century BC when Greek soldiers fought for Persian and Egyptian employers, where the use of the aforementioned literary devices by Classical authors is exposed and new reconstructions and interpretations that favour Rop’s main hypotheses are proposed.

Following a strict chronological order, unlike in the original version of the thesis, Rop starts in his second chapter (“The Battle of Cunaxa”, p. 30–63) with the campaign of Cyrus the Younger against his brother, King Artaxerxes II, which ended on the banks of the Euphrates with the defeat of Cunaxa (401 BC), although the pretender enlisted for his quest almost 13,000 Greek mercenaries. Rop emphasizes that the main source for this expedition, Xenophon’s “Anabasis”, is one of the most important for the birth of the Greek Thesis because it inaccurately portrays Cyrus as a highly skilful leader and his Greeks as exceedingly competent troops, although the campaign was rather ill-conceived and ill-executed and the Greeks were far less central to Cyrus’ strategy and far less decisive on the battlefield as Xenophon implies. The main literary devices employed by Xenophon to create this portrait (focalization, speeches, anecdotes, etc.) are explored at length and with good results. However, the author’s conclusion that the Athenian historian depicts Cyrus, a Persian, as some kind of Tragic Advisor, while he considers Clearchus, a Spartan, partly blameful for the demise is a red flag that we should not generalize and absolutize the use of this trope by biased Classical writers, as Rop maintained in the previous chapter (p. 32–45). The rest of this section

is devoted to a reconstitution of the battle plans of the two armies and the way that they were put into practice. It concludes that Artaxerxes II chose to exploit the lack of mobility of the Hellenic hoplites, in particular, by ordering a feigned retreat of his left flank that opposed them while taking advantage of his superiority in numbers on the right flank, where his cavalry troops executed an ample outflanking manoeuvre. The Greeks fell into the trap and pursued the retreating forces instead of obeying Cyrus' order to pivot to the left and attack the centre where the Great King was. Thus, the young prince had to desperately launch a cavalry charge in front of his heavily outnumbered retinue with the hope that he could change the odds of the battle by killing the king (p. 45–63). While very ingenious, this reconstruction might be admitted only if we accept that Xenophon badly misjudged, either unintentionally, or on purpose, the progression of the battle.

The following chapter (“Greece and the Rebellion of Cyrus the Younger”, p. 64–87) is a further inquiry into the career of Cyrus the Younger, in order to grasp more on the relationship between this Persian employer and his Greek captains and soldiers. It is here where Rop expands most on his idea that Greeks were recruited not for their presumed undisputable military superiority, but for a mix of factors, starting from their relatively low price and large experience, and ending with their loyalty. Using Cyrus' career as a case study, the author discusses the well-known interdependence between monarchs and foreign mercenaries: the former needed the latter to balance the influence of their peoples, while the latter had to be loyal as they were isolated in foreign lands and dependent on the monarchs, in Rop's own words, “paid to uphold unpopular rule in a land not their own, they are as reliant on their employers as their employers are on them” (p. 70). On the other hand, in the case of Cyrus (and other Anatolian satraps), the loyalty of his Greeks was commended not only by sheer necessity but also by his private alliances with leaders of various Hellenic states and foremost of all, Sparta. On the one hand, this mechanism made him the respected hegemon of the Aegean, on the other, as his Greek clients also used *xenia* ties to recruit people, it strengthened even more the loyalty bonds between him and his Hellenic army. Rop makes the astute observation that the foundation for such behaviour was already laid at the end of the 6th century BC, with Oroetes' and Artaphernes' patronages over Polycrates and Aristagoras, and that it was developed by Megabyzus and Pissouthnes in the 5th century BC.

Chapter 4 (“Greeks in Persia and Egypt, ca. 400–360”, p. 88–118) is a review of the military relations between these three significant powers of the Eastern Mediterranean in most of the first half of the 4th century BC, based

on the examination of the deeds of pairs of Greek and foreign leaders: Conon of Athens and Pharnabazus of Hellespontine Phrygia (p. 88–98), Chabrias of Athens and Acoris of Egypt (p. 98–100), Iphicrates of Athens and Pharnabazus (p. 100–107), Agesilaus of Sparta and Tachos of Egypt (p. 107–111), Agesilaus and Nectanebo of Egypt (p. 111–115). The revised interpretation that Rop gives to the events as a consequence of his critical assessment of the literary tropes employed by Classical sources and foremost by Diodorus allows him to highlight two things: a) that Greek soldiers were not recruited for their superiority as heavy infantry but because of their expert training as sailors and marines; b) that Greek commanders were not employed because of their better generalship but primarily based on political calculus of Egyptian and Persian leaders who desired either to open a new front in Greece or to close it through alliances with cities which sent them their most prominent captains. Besides the general conclusions, each case may better illustrate some peculiarities: the case of Conon and Pharnabazus shows how beneficial could mutually be the *xenia* between a Greek general and a Persian satrap and how it also benefitted their states, that of Chabrias' service in Egypt underscores that the private capacity assumed by some Greek commanders actually was an astute device of the cities which covertly sent them to fight on behalf of Persian enemies to prevent harsher reprimand from Persia etc.

The next two chapters, 5 (“The Revolt of Artabazus”, p. 119–147) and 6 (“The Persian Conquest of Egypt”, p. 148–175), deal separately with two events that were crucial to the development of the Greek Thesis, as they seemed to attest the only clear recognition by the Great King of the peril represented by the Hellenic mercenaries employed by his satraps, as well as an instance when Greeks faced each other in a Persian-Egyptian war whose final result was decided by the degree of compliance with the advice given by Greek generals. Applying the same methods of critical literary analysis used in the previous sections of the book, in chapter 5, Rop advances the hypothesis that Artabazus was not disloyal to the king before 353 BC, but that he was just pursuing the traditional petty competition with other satraps. He also maintains that the so-called Mercenaries Decree, a supposed order given by the Great King to the Anatolian satraps to disband all their Greek troops, attested only by the Demosthenes Scholiast, was in fact a particular request sent to the Athenians by Artaxerxes III in 355 BC to recall Chares from Artabazus and to end the Social War. As all the actors in the Artabazus affair – Athens, Thebes, Mausolus, Artabazus himself – complied with the will of the Great King shows just how heavily entrenched was his control in the Aegean due to the system of satrapal competition and patronage of Greek

cities. In chapter 6, Rop re-examines Diodorus' account of Artaxerxes III' conquest of Egypt of 343/342 BC, showing that it should not be considered as a confrontation decided by the battles between the Greeks of each party, as the ancient historian misrepresents the facts. Instead, he maintains that the war was decided by the strategies of the two contending powers and by the internal weakness of the Egyptian side, while the massive use of Greek soldiers on both sides reflects their value as sailors and marines and the high degree of patronage that Persia in particular had been able to introduce in the Aegean.

The last two chapters, 7 ("The Greco-Persian Defense of Western Anatolia", p. 176–206) and 8 ("The Fall of the Achaemenid Persian Empire", p. 207–230), deal with the Macedonian conquest of the Achaemenid Empire, which "for many ... is the final confirmation of the Greek Thesis" (p. 176), not only because the army of Alexander the Great seemed to be much superior to the Persian host, but also because the ancient sources portray the Greek mercenaries of Persia as its only hope for survival against the Macedonian onslaught. For the most part, Rop refutes this last assertion, focusing, for example, on the inconclusive results achieved by Memnon of Rhodes at Cyzicus, Grynium, and Magnesia, during the first Macedonian campaign in Western Asia, and subsequently at Granicus and Halicarnassus during the Persian counterattack in the Aegean, which strongly contrast with Diodorus' and Arrian's portrayal of him as the most formidable opponent of the Macedonians (p. 182–187, 196–206). As in the case of Cunaxa, Rop engages in interesting reconstructions of the battles of Granicus (p. 189–196), Issus (p. 208–220), and Gaugamela (p. 220–226) that significantly alter the traditional view of Macedonian heroism and indisputable military superiority that crush the overwhelming numbers of the Persian armies led by incompetent and coward generals. According to these revised perspectives, the odds of the battles seem to have been much more balanced and the Macedonian victories much closer than previously thought, determined by Alexander's superior generalship and his army's greater experience and better training in front of rather capable Persian commanders and brave, but not as hardened in war, Persian troops. The depiction of the Greek forces that fought on the Persian side as the only hope for a successful stand against the Macedonians is called into question as well. Some blame for the Persian defeats is even put on them. One last important idea expressed in these two chapters is that the Greeks recruited by the Achaemenid empire should not be considered mere mercenaries, as most of them represented the anti-Macedonian parties in the Greek cities and genuinely thought that Persia was the only power that could help them resist against Macedon and bring freedom back to Greece (p. 226–230).

The conclusions at the end, suggestively titled “The Other Persian Wars” (p. 231–235), synthetically review the main arguments made throughout the book. They are of great help to readers interested in easily identifying the author’s main ideas, as well as the rich Index that facilitates the investigation of specific matters (p. 258–265). The list of referenced works (p. 236–257) is amply populated with the most important titles in the field of the military history of the 4th century BC, the topic of mercenaries included, and even rather obscure studies for Western scholars, yet useful, like my own article “World-Systems Based on Reciprocity. Eastern Empires, Aegean Politics, and Greek Mercenaries in the Archaic Age”, published in a Romanian journal of international relations,⁴ are cited. Therefore, it is surprising that a monograph like Marco Bettalli’s “Mercenari. Il mestiere delle armi nel mondo greco antico” (2013) is absent (although the same author’s book of 1995,⁵ restricted to the archaic period and the 5th century BC, is mentioned).

A sound assessment of this book cannot be other than positive. As we still regard the military and political relations between the Greeks, the Persians, and the Egyptians in the 4th century BC almost exclusively through the lenses of the biased Hellenocentric Classical authors, this refutation of the Greek Thesis is highly welcome. Even though Greek heavy infantry might have been superior to any other Oriental melee infantry units, Greek armies were not decisively superior to their Eastern counterparts as a whole. From a military point of view, the Persian satraps of Asia Minor and the Egyptian leaders recruited Hellenic soldiers due to their geographic proximity and financial expediency, for their experience not only as heavy infantry, but also – and sometimes more significantly – as sailors and marines, and for their usual greater loyalty than that of local troops. Furthermore, Rop rightly contends that recruitments had an additional political dimension that even surpassed in importance their military side: they were the means for Persian and Egyptian overlords to assert their patronage over certain Greek cities. Moreover, for the Egyptians, it was a way to open a new western front for their Persian foes. On the other hand, coupled with the Achaemenid internal policy of allowing a certain degree of competition between the satraps of Western Asia, these patronage relations enabled the Great King to exert a continuous hegemony over the Aegean from the end of the Peloponnesian War to the Macedonian conquest.

I do not agree though with Rop’s extreme view that the Greek soldiers employed by the Persians and the Egyptians should not be considered

⁴ Iancu, 2014.

⁵ Bettalli, 1995.

mercenaries anymore because of this political side of their employment. The right and the ability to recruit mercenaries from a certain area or polity is frequently a matter of political ties, as shown, for example, by the clauses dealing with this specific matter enclosed in Hellenistic alliance treaties. Moreover, even though it is true that sometimes Greek military leaders employed by Persia or Egypt acted simultaneously as political agents of their cities and that they used their *xeniai* to enlist other captains, this cannot efface the fact that their armies were paid and employed in a typical mercenary way and that the rank and file had diverse origins and their motivation was overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, economical: the mixed composition of the Ten Thousand or the 400 Greek guards of the distant satrap of Phoenicia, Abrocomas, are just two of the many instances that show without any doubt that the term ‘mercenaries’ is not at all farfetched for describing most of the Hellenic soldiers that fought for the Persians or the Egyptians.

Rop’s book should be valued not only for its hypotheses and conclusions but also for its methodology. Modern scholars who work on the texts of Diodorus, Arrian, or Xenophon should be aware of their frequent employment of tropes like those of the Tragic Advisor or the Dynamic Subordinate and of narrative techniques such as focalisation. Although they are not as ubiquitous as the author seems to imply (Rop himself underscores a few cases where the tropes are even inverted, like that of Cyrus the Younger!), these tropes and techniques are clearly very influential in distorting the historical facts and our modern point of view on them. A critical reading of the Classical sources, forewarned on this matter, may trigger significant shifts not only in the interpretation of historical events but also in their reconstruction, as demonstrated by Rop’s interesting versions of major and minor battles or his revised chronology of the activity of Artabazus. However, care should be taken in this direction, as it sometimes may lead to exaggerated departures from the ancient texts and mere speculation.

In the end, there is no doubt that this clear and enjoyable book should be a necessary read for whoever studies ancient Greek military history and the Greek-Persian political relations of the Classical period.

Liviu Mihail Iancu

The Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilization

References

- Bettalli, M., 1995. *I mercenari nel mondo greco. I. Dalle origini alla fine del V sec. a.C.* Pisa, Edizioni ETS.
- Bettalli, M., 2013. *Mercenari: il mestiere delle armi nel mondo greco antico: età arcaica e classica.* Roma, Carocci
- Herman, G., 1987. *Ritualised Friendship and the Greek City.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Iancu, L. M., 2014. "World-systems based on reciprocity. Eastern empires, Aegean polities and Greek mercenaries in the Archaic age". *Romanian Journal of History and International Studies* 1(1): 53–70.
- Iancu, L. M., 2018. *Mercenari greci în epoca arhaică.* PhD thesis, University of Bucharest.
- Weiskopf, M., 1989. *The So-Called 'Great Satraps Revolt,' 366–360 BC: Concerning Local Instability in the Achaemenid Far West.* Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag.

