

The Army Of Alexander The Great

Details

Title:	The Army of Alexander the Great
Author:	Stephen English
Format:	Paperback
Published:	2021 (First published 2009), Pen & Sword
Price:	£12.99
ISBN:	1399013866
Reviewer:	Martin Stephenson
Reviewed:	January, 2022

Review

This book was first published in 2009 in a hardback edition and was briefly reviewed in Slingshot by Mark Watson¹. As far as I can tell, this new paperback edition is a straight reprint and not a new edition. The paperback is well laid out with a strong binding; you do not have to risk breaking the spine to read the book.

I do not have a deep understanding of the Classical period so I was looking forward to reading this book. Essentially, I have approached this review from the perspective of someone new to the period or with only background knowledge of the period.

The contents appears ideal for a reader looking to understand the composition of Alexander the Great's army. There are five chapters on different troop types (heavy infantry, cavalry etc) and one each on naval forces, siege engines & command structure. The book ends with a discussion of three very different engagements: the Balkans campaign (335 BC), the battle of Issus (333 BC) and the siege of Tyre (332 BC).

From the start English assumes a background knowledge of Alexander's story and uses special terms, like "Iphicraten peltasts, very early on without any introduction². A basic map would have helped with the former³ and a pointer to later in the book would have been useful for the latter. This approach may hamper the general reader.

The book is based on an academic thesis and it shows. There's clearly been a lot of rewriting and adaptation but it has left many early passages a little too dense, repetitious and confusing in places; although the later chapters flow far better.

¹ Slingshot 267, 5

² Iphicraten peltasts are however defined much later in the book. See pages 68-70.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great#/media/File:MacedonEmpire.jpg

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As an example of the former, English discusses the origins of the term *Pezhetairoi* at the very beginning of the first chapter. In doing so he refers to three different Alexanders without specifying any dates. This makes the section read like a Marx Brothers' sketch⁴. I had to reread this section together with a separate list of the kings of Macedonia from Wikipedia⁵ before it made sense. Not a great start.

Despite being extensively revised, the book uses an academic "tone of voice" throughout. The text's saving grace is that many sections have a similar structure; they start with details followed by a discussion and end with either a summary or a conclusion. However, the discussion is laden with phrases like "it is probable", "it is possible" and "it is likely" and their obverse. Although par for the course, especially given the scarcity of sources, this can be heavy going as English works his way through one academic opinion after another. Only rarely does English refute an option completely so the book is for readers prepared to deal with uncertainty.

Interestingly, English is not a fan of the "hammer & anvil" theory where Alexander is thought to use the pike phalanx as an anvil and his Companion cavalry as a hammer. He believes the pike phalanx is essentially an aggressive part of the army. He also argues for the phalangites being generally lightly armoured except for the file leaders fighting in the front two ranks.

English provides a whole chapter about hypaspists and tackles the associated "controversy" head on and I found this very interesting. He believes that they were as lightly armoured as the majority of phalangites, and were equally capable of using a sarissa, a hoplite spear or a javelin as circumstances demanded. He also believes the main difference between them and the phalangites is their ability to operate in difficult terrain. Given how often this topic has occurred on the Society forum I'm sure this chapter will interest many Society members.

With the final three chapters on the field army (Macedonian cavalry, Thessalonian cavalry and Alexander's use of mercenaries and the various allied contingents in his army) English is on much firmer ground. All three chapters are very readable and well structured. The chapters on the Macedonian and Thessalian cavalry are both comprehensive and detailed. I liked the inclusion of the archaeological data; it made a change from endless textual analysis. He also tackles the inclusion of Persian cavalry into the army with a degree of certainty.

The short chapters on Mediterranean fleets, siege engines and command structure round out the description of the army. The chapter on siege engines is interesting as it contains details of their field use in river crossings. The chapter on the command structure is a little repetitive and would benefit from further editing.

The final chapter "The Army In Action" sees English break most of the strictures of the academic approach and present a clear narrative covering three very different campaigns.

⁴ <https://www.marx-brothers.org/whyaduck/info/movies/scenes/contract.htm>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_kings_of_Macedonia

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He neatly illustrates how the various components of the army were woven together by Alexander to maximise the opportunities presented to him by the terrain and his opponents.

There's no doubt that English has full mastery of the scarce sources. Within their bounds, the strength of his conclusions rely on how well the sources are marshalled in support of his views and, for the general reader, how clearly they are expressed. I found the book strong on the details but sometimes lacking in the clarity required to engage the general reader. For a more knowledgeable reader I suspect the book has more to offer not least as a source of reference.

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Argead Dynasty (Kings of Macedon)

- [Karanus](#) Κάρανος 808–778 BC (possibly fictional)
- [Koinos](#) Κοινός 778–750 BC (possibly fictional)
- [Tyrimmas](#) Τυρίμμας (possibly fictional)
- [Perdiccas I](#) Περδίκκας Α' 700–678 BC
- [Argaeus I](#) Ἀργαῖος Α' 678–640 BC
- [Philip I](#) Φίλιππος Α' 640–602 BC
- [Aeropus I](#) Ἀέροπος Α' 602–576 BC
- [Alcetas I](#) Ἀλκέτας Α' 576–547 BC
- [Amyntas I](#) Ἀμύντας Α' 547–498 BC
- [Alexander I](#) Ἀλέξανδρος Α' 498–454 BC
- [Alcetas II](#) Ἀλκέτας Β' 454–448 BC
- [Perdiccas II](#) Περδίκκας Β' 448–413 BC
- [Archelaus](#) Ἀρχέλαος Α' 413–399 BC
- [Craterus](#) Κρατερός 399 BC
- [Orestes](#) Ὀρέστης and [Aeropus II](#) Ἀέροπος Β' 399–396 BC
- [Archelaus II](#) Ἀρχέλαος Β' 396–393 BC
- [Amyntas II](#) Ἀμύντας Β' 393 BC
- [Pausanias](#) Πausανίας 393 BC
- [Amyntas III](#) Ἀμύντας Γ' 393 BC
- [Argaeus II](#) Ἀργαῖος Β' 393–392 BC
- [Amyntas III](#) Ἀμύντας Γ' 392–370 BC
- [Alexander II](#) Ἀλέξανδρος Β' 370–368 BC
- [Perdiccas III](#) Περδίκκας Γ' 368–359 BC
 - [Ptolemy of Aloros](#) Πτολεμαῖος Α', Regent of Macedon 368–365 BC
- [Amyntas IV](#) Ἀμύντας Δ' 359–356 BC
- [Philip II](#) Φίλιππος Β' 359–336 BC
- [Alexander III, the Great](#) Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μέγας 336–323 BC
 - [Antipater](#) Ἀντίπατρος, Regent of Macedon 334–323 BC
- [Philip III Arrhidaeus](#) Φίλιππος Γ' 323–317 BC and [Alexander IV](#) Ἀλέξανδρος Δ' 323–310 BC^[1]
 - [Perdiccas](#) Περδίκκας, Regent of the Macedon Empire 323–321 BC^[2]
 - [Antipater](#) Ἀντίπατρος, Regent of the Macedon Empire 321–319 BC
 - [Polyperchon](#) Πολυπέρχων, Regent of the Macedon Empire 319–317 BC
 - [Cassander](#) Κάσανδρος, Regent of Macedon 317–305 BC

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_kings_of_Macedonia

Created: 14:49, Sat 15 January, 2022

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