



Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity

J.E. Lendon

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What set the successful armies of Sparta, Macedon, and Rome apart from those they defeated? In this major new history of battle from the age of Homer through the decline of the Roman empire, J. E. Lendon surveys a millennium of warfare to discover how militaries change—and don't change—and how an army's greatness depends on its use of the past.

Noting this was an age that witnessed few technological advances, J. E. Lendon shows us that the most successful armies were those that made the most effective use of cultural tradition. Ancient combat moved forward by looking backward for inspiration—the Greeks, to Homer; the Romans, to the Greeks and to their own heroic past. The best ancient armies recruited soldiers from societies with strong competitive traditions; and the best ancient leaders, from Alexander to Julius Caesar, called upon those traditions to encourage ferocious competition at every rank.

Ranging from the Battle of Champions between Sparta and Argos in 550 B.C. through Julian's invasion of Persia in A.D. 363, *Soldiers and Ghosts* brings to life the most decisive military contests of ancient Greece and Rome. Lendon places these battles, and the methods by which they were fought, in a sweeping narrative of ancient military history. On every battlefield, living soldiers fought alongside the ghosts of tradition—ghosts that would inspire greatness for almost a millennium before ultimately coming to stifle it.

Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity Details

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Steven Wolstenholme says

I never finished this book. I think Lendon tried too hard to reconcile the differences between the individualistic heroic warfare depicted in Epic (Homer) and the massed phalangites of real warfare. He gives a lot of convoluted rationalizations to show that phalanx warfare could actually be considered heroic in the minds of Greek soldiers and generals, as if ancient soldiers actually needed this validation. He never convinced me that more needed to be said on the matter than people do what works in war, not what sounds cool in a book. Besides all that, his prose reminds me of how mine read in my first year of college. Maybe that's just me.

Jane says

Not so much a *history* of battle in classical antiquity as *why* and *how* it developed as it did. Covers the millennium from the Age of Homer until Julian in Persia and Valens at Adrianople [300s A.D.] Author makes surprising leaps in his perceptions of the development of land warfare and psychology of the warriors. Apparently, it went slower at first, then picked up speed. Today it seems that methods of fighting change every time you turn around. The author intended this for the beginner to the very knowledgeable reader. It WAS readable but sometimes I felt there were too many details over my head. I'm assuming that "ghosts" in the title refers to the heroes of the Trojan War in the background as an inspiration. Recommended.

Luka Novak says

This book does not explain how ancients fought but rather why did they fight the way they did. Lendon argues that ancients' (Greece, Macedon, Rome) way of war wasn't determined by their equipment but rather their culture. Lendon's leitmotif is that these militaries harnessed the competition between individuals and used that to create formidable armies, even armies that on the surface seem to replace individual with mass such as phalanx or legion.

Having said that this is not a book for beginners. Reader will require some prior knowledge about world and wars of the period in question, simply because author doesn't go into details about campaigns, doctrine and equipment. If you have no idea what Roman legion of any period was about, how legionaires were equipped and how legion was organised you'll have troubles following Lendon's ideas. If you are not familiar with history of Rome you'll have trouble understanding how Rome went from fighting Greeks to fighting Germanic invaders to invading Mesopotamia.

But as with many other authors who stumble upon a new idea Lendon sees his discovery as panacea, able to explain everything it is applied to. While I'm not saying the idea is wrong, I don't think it was the sole reason why militaries operated the way they did. It should be seen as so far overlooked additional reason, one that may explain others a bit more.

Bruce Hesselbach says

This insightful and well-written book uses the ancient Greek and Roman world to study how cultural factors make an army successful or unsuccessful. The book begins with a modern example to show the relevance of this study. In the Prologue, we are given a vivid description of a skirmish in which the U.S. Marines took casualties because of their cultural belief that they should recover the bodies of their dead. Why would they do that? Doesn't it interfere with their success as an army? What possible use can it have from a military standpoint?

I particularly enjoyed reading about the tension in the Roman army between *virtus* (reckless courage) and *disciplina* (the discipline to follow orders). When the system worked well, both these concepts increased the effectiveness of the Roman army. However, when homage to the martial past degenerated into mindless imitation, cultural values destroyed the army's prowess.

As Lendon aptly points out: "However primitive or sleekly modern the machinery of war, the idiosyncratic beliefs of the men of every time and place play their role in how war is fought."

Andreas Schmidt says

Un testo di storia molto valido e ben documentato, che parla di riflesso degli usi e dei costumi dei greci e dei romani, spiegando il loro modo di fare la guerra, pur senza scendere nel particolare tecnicismo delle armi e delle tecniche militari.

April says

This was a weird sort of read for me. The moments Lendon chose to touch on for the Greek half of his book made complete sense to me, although I don't particularly love the Lattimore translation of the *Iliad*, so he didn't sell me on that. However, I found the Roman events to be strange. He didn't choose only battles the Romans won, so why he barely touched on Cannae, which loomed large in the Roman psyche for years (*Carthago delenda est* anyone?) but spent an entire chapter on Pydna was a bizarre choice to me. Also, his complete avoidance of any of the civil war battles, or indeed any serious discussion of the revolution of the army from Marius on outside of a couple of side-long mentions to the increasing loyalty to generals was another strange decision to me. Finally, his choice to spend two whole chapters talking about warfare under Julian and later was a complete mystery to me, especially since he completely jumped over Constantine (who barely rated a mention).

Overall, I didn't find his argument 100% compelling, but he did make an interesting case for the motivating factors in ancient warfare (although there is a pointed lack of anything not Greek or Roman), but of course there is not way to know anything about this definitively.

Marcus says

Ancient military history and its technical aspects are surprisingly popular topics among modern historians. One could almost say that the market is currently saturated by books analyzing the Greek hoplites, campaigns of Alexander the Great and military history of Rome. It is therefore no surprise that historians trying to contribute to the topic better ensure that they come up with something innovative if they are to be noticed.

J.E. Lendon tries to do exactly that with his rather innovative reappraisal of the history of Greek and Roman art of war. Instead of taking the worn-out path of chronological recount of events and technical analysis, he chooses to examine Greek phalanx and Roman legion from cultural point of view. By doing this, he comes to the conclusion that the explanation to those two formations and everything that followed with them are not a product of conscious development of military art, but rather an expression of cultural values and beliefs held by Greek and Roman societies.

Foundation of Lendon's thesis in case of Greek hoplite formation consists of the fact that Homeros and his Iliad provided Greek culture with the core of its values as well as an ideal for its warriors. According to the author, the primary characteristic of Homeric warrior is his competitiveness, against friend and foe alike. It is this competitiveness that, if one is to believe Lendon, drives the Greek style of warfare to more and more organized and structured form. The ultimate goal for this formalization was to counter the natural chaos of the battlefield and provide an environment where prowess of an individual could be reliably judged, which in turn allowed ranking of warriors, according to the level of excellence they displayed.

Roman legion in its original form is explained by the author by focusing on two of Roman society's most precious virtues. Virtus, which is the martial courage and aggressiveness was one and disciplina, which in simplest possible terms can be described as obedience of a superior and discipline while in ranks, is the other. Lendon regards those two equally valued characteristics as directly opposing concepts and therefore in constant conflict with each other. He uses this conflict as an explanation for the rather peculiar manipular formation, which Roman legions used pretty much until the final century of the Republic period. Lendon's analysis doesn't stop there - he argues that virtus and disciplina manifest themselves equally strongly also in the later legion formation, where cohorts replaced maniples as tactical unit.

Finally, Lendon deals with the transformation of cohort formations into smaller legions of later empire. His explanation for this development is provided by apparent archaisation of later Roman society and reemergence of old Greek virtues as something worthy aspiring toward. One of those virtues would of course be Homer and his Iliad, which in turn would explain reemergence of hoplite formation as preferred Roman fighting method during 3rd and 4th century.

I must admit that theories presented in "Soldiers and Ghosts" are well-argued and rather compelling. I wouldn't be surprised if the author is actually on to something. However, regardless of Lendon's valiant effort to provide innovative and certainly different explanation for developments the art of war in Greece and Rome of classical period, I find his theories as rather speculative and in the end unsubstantiated.

Lendon fails to make lasting impression on me for many reasons, but first and foremost it's because I just can't imagine the almost Bushido-like effect of few selected meta-physical ideas on Greeks and Romans, who in most aspects of life strike me as very pragmatic people. Just as an example, let's look at hoplite formation and ask ourselves following question: which is more resonable explanation for its existence - its formidable strength and protection it gave its members or a subconscious strife to reach a semi-mythical

ideal? Likewise, when Lendon points out eagerness of Roman soldiers to get to grips with their opponents, which at times was so intense that their leaders couldn't control them - was it because of some lofty idea praised by highest echelons of their society? Or was the explanation something as prosaic as an ordinary Roman warrior's wish for loot?

I guess that ultimately, whether you'll agree with ideas presented in "Ghosts and Soldiers" will depend on individual willingness to accept the idea that Greeks and Romans were rather different people than us. Personally, I don't believe that and I think that regardless of their, by our standards, "exotic" belief systems and moral codes, they were nonetheless driven by motivations and impulses pretty much identical to our own. That's why I regard "Soldiers and Ghost" as interesting and thought-provoking read, but ultimately as a misguided attempt to solve some of the many riddles that still remain unsolved in regard of military aspects of Greek and Roman civilizations.

Endre Fodstad says

This one is really good. Lendon's case is argued clearly for both the greek and roman parts of the book, and is an excellent counterpoint to the idea that premodern warfare went through something like evolutionary processes. Instead, he argues, greek and roman society looked to ideals, ideas and actions of earlier warfare for solutions - the "ghosts" - even when the ghosts did not provide useful answers to their problems. This also extended to the individual level, especially during the roman period - roman commanders would frequently attempt to imitate their idolized heroes, not always very successfully.

Mike Anastasia says

This book is mostly a social history of the ancient advocating for cultural annihilation due to, again, social ineptitude.

Lendon's book is a perfect "intro to" book for classes of military, classical, Greco-Roman or weaponry history but his efforts are dwarfed in larger-scale by some of the anthologies put together by Favro, Smith, etc.

For someone looking for the glory of old war, skip this and read Herodotus' own account.

For something looking for the glory of old statesmanship and public oration, give this a try.

Adam McPhee says

Read about half of this before giving up. Might download for my kindle and try again, though.

Joe says

This is not a compendium of maneuvers, weapons and tactics usual to most military histories. Instead, we are

given a social history of warfare in ancient Greece and Rome that looks to the morals, literature and social values of the age that inspired men to fight the way they did. It's an analysis that shows how the structure of their armies were modeled on that of the civil societies which produced them, and the degree to which warrior ideals reflected those of their society as a whole. The book is divided into two halves, one focusing on Greece, and the other Rome. The era's were similar, but not identical, and the first threw a long shadow over the second. Interpretations of the Iliad being shown to have a disproportionate influence on how men expected war to be, often guiding commanders decision (sometimes catastrophically) on battlefields centuries after any lessons it contained were obsolete.

The half focusing on Rome is particularly insightful for its frequent analyses of how an observer's perspective influenced Rome's understanding of the past, or for that matter how we understand Rome, and the misconceptions that can arise from that. One of the more intriguing discussions is about Rome's inability to understand just how much conditions changed over time, often blinding later leaders to the reality that the equipment and formations their men were using were not those used by the soldiers of an earlier age. This was a fatal flaw in a backward society obsessed with emulating the past, that accepts change only in the form of doing a past triumph the same way only better. Or which accepts innovation by disguising innovation as a return to some lost past practice. The theme of living by the ghosts of the past leads the final chapter to close the book out with an interesting twist.

This is good read for somebody with a serious historical inclination who does not mind seeing some of the standard notions of the Greco-Roman challenged.

Fred says

A part of me wants to give this 3 stars to be fair because I have a feeling that the reason I enjoyed it so little is simply because I've already read so much on the subject of warfare in antiquity and a large number of books on antiquity in general. There just wasn't much of anything new here for me and it wasn't very exciting to read which is reflected in the fact that it took me as long as it did to actually finish this book.

Now, it wasn't bad and it would be a good place to start for someone interested in a broad overview of Greek and Roman history, but for someone looking for more depth, or someone who doesn't need the overview this is not a book for you at all. Decently well written, it wasn't bad, it just wasn't exciting as some others. At least it wasn't quite like reading a textbook.

David says

Soldiers and Ghosts is an unusually literary analysis of ancient militaries. The book, in two halves, traces the evolution of the Classical Greek and Hellenistic armies and those of Rome. In each portion, Lendon adopts a very simple thesis stating how specific cultural values influenced the development of these militaries and their uses in otherwise counterintuitive ways. Among the Greeks, Lendon identifies innate competitiveness and veneration of the Homeric epics as primary drivers; among the Romans, a long-enduring conflict between *virtus*, martial courage and excellence, and *disciplina*, restraint and order, coupled with a strong impulse towards emulating the past.

The former is not in its simplest form an especially controversial thesis; no one would seriously argue that the Greeks did not venerate Homer and the Homeric values. But Lendon's case, that Homeric values and competitions underlaid, while not dictating, a variety of changes in military technologies and tactics through the history of Greece is subtler than that, and it is quite persuasive. Homer, he notes, does not posit an internally consistent and complete value system, and this flexibility allowed for the ferocious competitiveness Lendon finds in Greek culture to express itself in very different ways while still claiming the authority of epic. (Because Greece is my specialty, it is this section I found most prepossessing).

Despite his willingness to challenge the authors from whose texts he works, Lendon does leave himself open occasionally to the charge that he takes unreliable ancient writers too seriously and too universally. In the main, I don't believe this particularly damages the book: many of its arguments work just as well if what is being related is ancient perception rather than ancient reality, and Lendon does include reasonable, if abbreviated, justifications of his inferences. Nonetheless, readers, like me, of a more philological bent may find Lendon a bit too cavalier with his sources from time to time.

The other "flaw", if it may be so called, with the book is its focus. Lendon hews very closely to the line that he sets out, and the relative absence of counter-examples and areas in which other forcing causes contributed to military changes contribute to a sense that the author is overplaying his hand. And he may be: the two summary sections on Greece and Rome, in which Lendon sums up his theses and explores how military technology might have developed if guided purely by rational exigency, are perhaps the weakest portions of the book. Nonetheless, Lendon does what he sets out to do, and despite the tight focus of the book shows his awareness that the ideas he explores do not constitute an exhaustive explanation.

Lendon's prose style echoes his themes nicely. He writes in a restrained, clear, occasionally archaicizing register, filled with classical tropes and cadences. At times, *Soldiers and Ghosts* flows like a very fine translation from the Greek. The book is a genuine pleasure to read, and its style a lovely complement to its extended discussions of the emulation of the revered past.

Erunion says

Soldiers and Ghosts sets out to track the changes in Greek and Roman military structures and why they molded over time. While such a topic is quite fascinating, Lendon does not quite cash out many of his arguments, and unfortunately spends most of his time recounting ancient battles from a limited third person perspective rather than using such accounts to illuminate or demonstrate his points throughout the book. Such a feature is rather curious, since the accounts often seem to on the one hand assume that the reader is familiar with the concepts of *Polis*, Senate, Socrates, Xenophon, and Caesar; while on the other assume that the reader is not quite acquainted with a *gladius* or a *pilum*. Perhaps Lendon does this to add a bit of excitement to the material, but the reader is often left wondering if the book is meant to be a textbook for the uninitiated, or a scholarly treatise.

What arguments he does make are quite interesting, however. He emphasizes the more ritual nature of battle, such as maintaining possession of the battlefield, setting up trophies, and winning glory against an individual opponent against the more modern, traditional concerns of tactics (flanking, envelopment) and supply.

He also places interesting emphasis on active, martial courage, which he connotes with the greek word *agathos* and the latin word *virtus*, versus passive courage, connoted with *eutaxia* and *disciplina*. These two impulses -- the impulse to leave the line and engage the enemy and the impulse to stay in the lines and

defend one's comrades -- are constantly at war to a degree in the Greeks and always present in the Romans. Caesar must fight with the *virtus* of his legions to maintain *disciplina*, and Themistocles must deal with the entire city of Athens.

The ultimate problem of such an emphasis is that, aside from a bit of (largely unnecessary) narrative at the beginning of the book, Lendon seems to be unaware that such concepts not only carry into modern warfare, and almost assumes that such concepts died off (becoming the "Ghosts" of the title) with the Romans. But one can easily point to the conflict between Patton's *virtus* and Montgomery's *disciplina* in World War 2, or the Confederate versus Union styles of fighting in the American Civil War. Such impulses seem present in all warfare in all time in all places, and not just in the classical period. It is not clear how such impulses uniquely affect the Greeks and Romans, or if they are bringing unique solutions to such problems.

It is of course dangerous to pontificate on any discipline outside of one's own, but nonetheless it is an interesting comparison to make, if only as a question. Further, such an idea of academic modesty certainly doesn't stop Victor Davis Hanson from making the comment in his *Western Way of War* that commanders should emulate the Greek model and lead from the front.

In short, the book seems viciously padded out, but is quite intriguing if the reader is already familiar with classical history, is interested in the sociological dimension of warfare, and has perhaps already read Victor Davis Hanson's *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* or perhaps even (if one has a bit of *virtus* and *disciplina*) the initial chapters of Alasdair MacIntyre's philosophical treatise *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*.

Kiley says

J.E. Lendon is a professor at University of Virginia, with a specialization in Greek and Roman history. Lendon completed both his bachelors and Ph. D. at Yale University, shortly before publishing his first book *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* in 1997. Lendon then went on to release *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* in 2005 and *Song of Wrath: The Peloponnesian War Begins* in 2010. Lendon has received multiple awards for his teaching abilities, as well as for his historical studies and published work. Lendon's *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* is listed on yalebooks.com as being a major new history battle, spanning from the age of Homer through the decline of the Roman empire, in order to show how militaries change as well as how they don't, as well as how an army's success greatly depended on its use of the past. *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* was given positive reviews from common household names that most people are familiar with, such as the *New York Times*, stating the topic was "brilliantly analyzed", as well as *Publishers Weekly*, stating "witty, erudite, and painstaking". The book was also reviewed by Nicholas E. Efstathiou who specializes in military history, stating the book was "an excellent starting point for readers interested in the military histories of Greece and Rome". There are more positive reviews online, that include other historians, journals, and magazines. The book itself is published by Yale University Press, and sold in a multitude of stores and websites such as Barnes and Noble, and amazon.com. The book was selected for Association of American University Presses Books for Public and Secondary School Libraries in 2006, as well as becoming runner up for the Longman- History Today Book of the Year award in 2006. Lendon's description of *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* states that he covers how militaries change and don't change, what worked for certain militaries and what their downfalls were, and how the "most successful armies were those that made the most effective use of cultural tradition" (Lendon, 5). Lendon states that the best ancient armies traditionally recruited soldiers from areas with strong

competitive traditions and values, and encouraged that kind of ferocious competition within all ranks. Lendon's thesis to the book is that historians have traditionally overestimated the technology and tactics influence on military, and have looked over the importance of things like politics, and culture. Lendon argues that ancient armies would tend to look to the past for guidance in their future endeavors; each military strived to live up to the ancestral ideals.

Focusing on the Roman empire, Lendon tends to criticize Rome's honored ideal of iron discipline being the key to their success, as well as shows doubt that there was much cohesion in the key to their success. Lendon argues that the key to Roman success was its innate cultural motives such as Roman conservatism, "virtus" which is described to be "manliness" in the terms of ambition when it came to combat, and "disciplina" which is described as being more than just disciplined, but showing levels of restraint, obedience, the ability to channel their aggression until the right moment in battle, and punishment (Lendon, 249, 252). Lendon argues that these values were the keys to the Roman empires success, as well as conflict. He discusses however, a conflict that commonly happened with "brave but foolish" soldiers attempting to pursue their virtue that would lead to a lack in their success (Lendon, 189). Lendon quotes Aemilius Paullus; the victor of the Roman battle of Pydna in 167 B.C., talking about a "good general does not fight a pitched battle unless it is absolutely necessary or a sure path to victory" (Lendon, 298).

Lendon's *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* contains maps, photographs of pottery, art work, statues, and other historical evidence that shows the Roman's story telling's of their battles won and lost. The book is set up in a general format that makes it simple for most average paced readers to follow. There is a lengthy appendix, as well as index that provides for answers to any questions the reader may have about a topic or word. Lendon's analysis focuses on the political, social, and technological balances in the influences of culture and war, and uses a well written, easily readable format for optimal comprehension for the reader. This book would be great for any history class that is specifically focusing on Greek and Roman history with regards to military.
