

Ancient Warfare: A Very Short Introduction

Harry Sidebottom

Reviewed by Dr Malcolm Kennedy

In sighting this review the reader might naturally ask how a book on ancient warfare could be of relevance or interest to people interested in Australia's national security. Even a dip into this text and the answer is clear.

The book is complemented by a selection of excellent maps and illustrations, a chronology, detailed index and an outstanding bibliography. The twenty-page bibliography is organised around each chapter of the text and features extensive notes.

Professor Harry Sidebottom, a highly knowledgeable and skilled historian, has written a very short introduction to warfare in the ancient era. The book is an outstanding example of condensation of extensive scholarship and detail. Moreover, he writes with a light, highly readable touch and is not afraid to challenge 'haughty truths' or prickly scholars.

The book is an amazing resource. There are 128 pages of crisp text, which provide a surprisingly detailed account, principally of the Greeks and Romans, but also of their enemies the Arabs, Carthaginians, Germans, Huns, and Persians. The text focuses on the debate over the existence of a 'Western Way of War' (WWW). Many scholars are lined up for combat on the opposing sides of this debate.

Sidebottom, in mocking fashion, takes a sharp pin to the scholarly balloons that have been puffed up on this issue. His exposition of the history of ancient warfare provides a vast wealth of material covering the major and minor aspects of warfare in the 900-year period to AD 650. He swiftly sketches the most important campaigns and battles, but also adds an expert summary of the many exceptions to the supposed rule.

Sidebottom shows that the 'Western Way of War' is: 'the desire for open, decisive battle, which aims at the annihilation of the enemy. Ideally, it is conducted by heavily armed infantry fighting hand to hand. The battle is won by courage, which is instilled part by training and discipline. This is often linked to the combatants having political freedom and being landowners—so-called 'civic-militarism'.

He notes that it is claimed that the WWW was invented by the Greeks, inherited by the Romans, passed on through the Middle Ages, rediscovered during the

Renaissance and then applied in the modern West. The book is an exercise in examining the many and various wars throughout almost a millennium to determine if this form of warfare was the norm or if it even occurred.

One revelation is that the so-called WWW was used by non-Mediterranean nations and that the Greeks and the Romans often did not apply their invention,

but rather adopted indirect methods or relied on hired troops to fight for them, or actually used other forms of warfare including sieges and naval campaigns.

The seven chapters of the book examine the Western Way of War, thinking with war, war and society, thinking about war, strategy, fighting, and a discussion of the question of the reinvention of the WWW.

Sidebottom compares the Greeks with their main adversaries, the Romans and their enemies, and then he demonstrates that there were significant variations in the actual nature of the wars fought. He describes the ironic result of the shift in power from the Greeks to the Romans, whereby the Greeks no longer exhibited the WWW; rather they are seen as using inferior 'eastern' methods.

The chapter on 'thinking with war' reveals how the ancients used war to understand and order their world. This chapter ranges over culture, gender and the individual, and raises issues which are completely relevant to our own concerns. The Greeks were convinced that war should remain the preserve of men.

In thinking about war, Sidebottom shows that intellectuals in ancient times had deep concerns about the nature of war, its causes and the justification or lack of justification for civil and national wars. Indeed, this chapter offers a rigorous debate on war that could improve the quality of current discussions.

The chapters on strategy and fighting contain a great deal of information and repeatedly highlight there is little new in our concerns about national security. The ultimate lesson of this fine book is that war is a changing phenomena and a society's survival depends upon its flexibility in reinterpreting the emerging nature of war—and in having the will to make the necessary sacrifices to deter or defeat the enemy.

Harry Sidebottom, *Ancient Warfare A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 165pp., Softback, RRP \$22.95.

