

## BOOK REVIEW

*Roman Siege Warfare*. By JOSH LEVITHAN. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. Pp. ix + 247. Hardcover, \$70.00. ISBN 978-0-472-11898-4.

Battles get all the attention, but siege was a more common variety of combat than pitched battles for most of Roman history, except perhaps during civil wars. The Roman military was generally good at them. Josh Levithan attempts to correct the historiographical imbalance by focusing his examination entirely on Roman sieges. Unlike some of the previous studies he mentions, Levithan eschews the material culture and technological minutiae of sieges to focus more on what he calls the “human elements” that are critical to understanding sieges. In doing so, Levithan provides an original study that is both informative and engagingly written. All readers interested in not only sieges and Rome, but also the cultural history of warfare will benefit from giving this book a thorough examination.

In his Introduction Levithan provides his basic goal, “to explain what happened during sieges” (20) and to demonstrate that while “logistics and technology enable victory” (21), it was the superior “morale” of Roman soldiers that actually achieved victory. In the course of his introduction he discusses his methodology, sources, and why a new examination of siege is possible and necessary. Levithan draws explicitly upon the “Face of Battle” school of military history, which he calls the “Face-of-the-Siege”, but his analysis seems to take that approach in a new direction as he tries to grapple with the psychology (which he calls morale) of the soldiers and the moral quality of siege (the nature of human violence).

In chapter two, Levithan dives directly into the topic of combat motivation for Roman soldiers in a siege. This chapter is useful in emphasizing the importance of morale and the various means used by officers to deal with the problem of motivation at a siege. Although he draws from evidence across a couple centuries, he demonstrates that this approach works since methods of raising morale did not really change greatly. However, this chapter is also the weakest in the book, suffering from a weakness in relying excessively on modern work on unit cohesion that emphasizes the importance of social bonds. While Roman

soldiers undeniably formed relationships with comrades, strong evidence for social cohesion as a force for unit effectiveness is simply not present to the extent that it might be in modern armies.<sup>1</sup> Despite this weakness, the chapter is useful for understanding the importance of combat motivation and the actual “face-of-the-siege”.

Chapter three tackles the topic of how sieges progressed and the moral nature of the siege. Levithan seeks in this chapter to explain the pattern sieges tended to follow and how it was culturally as well as militarily determined. He lays out in a sort of flow-chart the stages nearly every siege for which we have good evidence followed. Levithan is aware that the standard progression we find was a function of the standard historical narrative pattern as much as military and cultural practice, but he demonstrates successfully that sieges followed a “one-way” route, as he calls it, in which the energy and morale invested in siege increase over time, never decreasing once the gates are shut and the defenders have rejected negotiation. Describing siege progress as like a ratchet gear Levithan provides a useful metaphor for thinking about and explaining sieges and how the energy invested increases the tension inexorably so that when the siege assault is successful all that tension releases at once providing the resulting energetic violence of the sack. Levithan also makes it clear that the progression was not a “law” or “policy”, it was simply how sieges worked and some stages could be repeated as necessary.

Narrative treatments of sieges are the topics of chapters four through seven, each arranged chronologically. Levithan organizes his discussion within these chapters by the authors and provides a useful evaluation of each author as well as of their siege narrative styles. In his fourth chapter he focuses on how Livy, Polybius, and other authors presented sieges in the Republic. The next chapter focuses on Caesar’s siege narratives because he forged new styles in sieges and in narrating them. The discussion then jumps a century to Josephus, Vespasian, and Titus, at the siege of Jerusalem in chapter six. This chapter is the most effective in demonstrating how commanders had to adapt when the ‘typical’ siege progression stalled. The final chapter on narratives covers the late Roman Empire and Ammianus Marcellinus. Levithan opens with a valuable discussion on siege tactics in the fourth century. After setting context he examines Ammianus Marcelli-

<sup>1</sup> The Roman side of this topic is dealt with briefly by J.E. Lendon, “The Roman Army Now,” *CJ* 99 (2004): 441-49, and at greater length by Jeremy Armstrong in a forthcoming article to be published in J. Armstrong, ed. *Circum Mare: Themes in Warfare in the Ancient Mediterranean* Leiden: Brill, forthcoming.

nus. These four chapters are extremely useful, especially in making clear the evolution of Roman sieges and siege narratives. They cannot hope to be comprehensive in a monograph so Levithan also calls for more work on these authors and on Persian sieges.

The final chapter covers the epilogue of most sieges, the sack of the city. This chapter is necessarily replete with violence and chaos, but Levithan again succeeds in bringing some sense to his discussion of the topic. He notes that whereas our sources for sieges are hit and miss, sources for sack are even thinner. He observes that this is in part because it often did not reflect well on the victorious army, but also because the commander's lack of control over his soldiers did not reflect well on the author's subject.

There are no maps, but that does not detract since tactics and strategy are not Levithan's topics. The book is also well edited (I found five minor editorial gaffs). As a final word it should be noted that although this is an academic monograph it is extremely well written. The discussion is clear and the author's style is straightforward and entertaining. This study will be the standard for Roman siege warfare and should stimulate much new work.

LEE L. BRICE

*Western Illinois University, ll-brice@wiu.edu*