

## BOOK REVIEW

*Army of the Roman Emperors*. By THOMAS FISCHER. Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2019. Pp. 416. Hardback, \$6.36. ISBN: 978-1-61200-810-3.

The title, *Army of the Roman Emperors*, might lead some to believe that this is just another lavishly illustrated coffee table book on the Roman military. *Au contraire!* It is a scholarly compendium of the evidence for the relationship between archaeology and history as it concerns the Roman Army. Fischer, a specialist in Roman provincial archaeology at the Archäologischen Institut of the University of Köln, has taken on the ambitious project of summarizing the military archaeology of the imperial period. He goes beyond just describing the archaeological remains and seeks to examine the interactions between monuments and artifacts and puts them in the context of the political and military history of Rome including its art, society and constitutional history.

The book, first published in German in 2012 as *Die Armee der Caesaren: Archäologie und Geschichte*, continues the tradition founded by L. Lindenschmidt (*Tracht und Bewaffnung des römischen Heeres während des Kaiserzeit* (Braunschweig, 1882) and continued by P. Coussin, *Les armes romaines* (Paris, 1926), H.R. Robinson, *The Armies of Imperial Rome* (London, 1975), M. Feugère, *Les armes des Romains de la République à l'antiquité tardive* (Paris, 1993/2021) and Bishop and Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment from the Punic Wars to the Fall of Rome*, (London, 1993/2006). The problems involved in writing such a book are legion. While the literary and written sources have remained largely unchanged, new epigraphic sources, i.e., inscriptions, papyri, ostraca and graffiti, obtained as archaeological finds, bring ever more new discoveries. One only has to think of the sudden increase in the discovery of military diplomas in recent years, largely resulting from the use of metal detectors. Within provincial Roman archaeology, the sheer number of excavations to be covered is immense, plus they expand every year, making it difficult to keep track of the mass of studies on find sites and types of finds published. Added to the problem of sifting through this immense body of evidence is the danger that the study of the material finds will become an

end in itself, as one can get easily bogged down in the chronological-typological systematization.

Fischer has cast his net widely. He draws on his own experiences as an excavator, plus his connections with research colleagues, private collectors, art dealers and re-enactors. He has had his students contribute on numerous details and some chapters are handed over to specialist colleagues, e.g., Dietrich Boschung on the iconographic sources, Thomas Schmidts on Roman naval bases and Ronald Bokius on Roman warships.

The Introduction begins with a very condensed overview of the structure of the Roman Army. Part I summarizes the iconographic sources. He tries to cover everything from the Late Republic to the fall of the empire in the West. Such a vast scope means in-depth analysis is impossible, and some may find his focus sometimes unbalanced, e.g., spending only three pages on artillery but 17 pages on swords and 19 pages on belts. In Part II he summarizes the history of research into the subject, the development of armaments and equipment and the question of the uniformity, production and distribution of weapons. Part III, the heart of the book, organizes the material by service and type of object. In Part IV he moves on to military construction and then tries to link all the information to the political situation and events in the imperial period. He has provided what is certainly the best available synthesis of the current state of research on military forts and border defenses accompanied by exemplary maps and plans. With all the studies on finds from camps, forts, hoards and underwater discoveries, it is good to have a single volume study that assesses them for us. Part V shows the army's development over time.

Throughout the book, Fischer reviews popular notions and brings serious discussion to gnarly issues such as whether helmets and body armor were made of leather (he thinks not). He rejects the idea that thin-walled construction and rich decoration in helmets is a sign such pieces were not intended for use in war but were simply "parade armor" (except in the case of masked helmets). He argues for soldiers themselves having to bear the high cost of clothing, arming and supplying themselves with equipment like entrenching tools, cookware and tarpaulins. As for the manufacture of weapons, there has been much discussion among researchers about whether this was done by the military or civilians. He cites the ample evidence in the camps, at Haltern for example, that attest to the production and repair of weapons and military equipment by craftsmen.

Fischer's book provides a veritable cornucopia of information and stimulating interpretation in an engaging and accessible style. Added to this are beautifully

executed tables and diagrams and lavish illustrations. Many of them showing previously unknown pieces which derive from illicit digs in the Lower Danube region. Such digs have flooded the western market since the fall of the Iron Curtain and are predominantly in the hands of private owners. In the most controversial segment, Fischer disagrees with those professionals who refuse to discuss objects from an unknown provenience. It is Fischer's goal, therefore, to catalogue as many of these objects as possible

The book was popular in Germany when it was published in 2012; a second edition was issued the same year. Now, in English, it is available to an entirely new audience, and the corrections suggested by Marcus Junkelmann in his review of the German version (*JRA* 29 (2016), 753-761) have given the author the opportunity for improvement. In short, this is a multi-faceted work, aimed at both the specialist and the novice, rich in information and observation about the development of soldiers' equipment types based on actual finds.

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