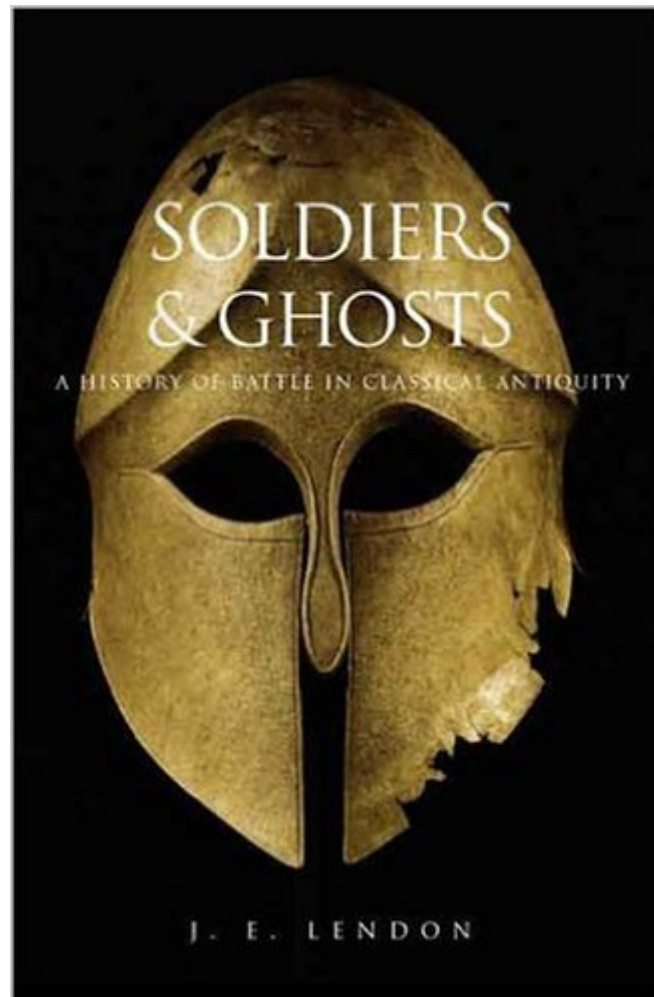


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Soldiers And Ghosts: A History Of Battle In Classical Antiquity



Synopsis

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.Â 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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I loved this book from the first line to the last; Why?1) It gives a complete view of Greek warfare following the full evolution: Mycenaean-->Spartan-->Theban-->Macedonian.2) the same for the Roman way: Greek phalanx-->maniples-->cohorts--> Greek phalanx(!)3) the book is analytical with

well thought arguments⁴) very nicely presented like a commentary on major battles, with justifications and inside analysis⁵) full of great decisive unique moments of military history: the defeat of Persians by the incredible Spartans, the defeat of the Athenians by the Theban phalanx, the ferocious confrontation of the Macedonian phalanx with the Roman maniples at Pydna in Macedonia (northern Greece); my favourite of all in this book the last chapter: the return of the Greek phalanx in the Roman warfare and Julius's expedition in Persia. The book is deep in its scope so for newcomers in this field I would recommend to buy (read) first a more elementary with graphics so that this text follows easily. Graphics are not many although when it comes to the Greeks one can find photos and sketches of the Macedonian phalanx, the Thessalian Cavalry, the Spartan phalanx and hoplites and when it comes to the Romans, sketches of the Roman legionaries and the maniples and cohorts. More passionate readers might want to consult other more elementary books for more graphical material. Overall the author has written a nice humanistic analysis of the way the Greeks and Romans fought; and there is a beauty in the way he connects the most brutal of human activities (killing) with other aspects of the human reality like politics, poetry, aesthetics. Well done, Mr Lendon, congratulations.

Soldiers and Ghosts is twice magnificent. It is a marvelous history of ancient warfare from the Iliad to the 4th century AD, full of wonderful details about who did what and how. It is also a fascinating exploration of one of the most basic historical questions: why do things change? If we ponder the question of why things change in history, we often fall back on technology. We assume, many of us, that societies change because they develop new tools or new techniques, which cause further changes rippling through institutions and lives. But is this always so? Lendon explores the question by looking at how different ancient armies fought. Over the course of Greek and Roman antiquity, different armies fought in very different ways, and in casual histories one often sees this explained by technological advances. Yet this cannot be so, because in fact there were very few changes in military technology between the time of the Assyrians and the fall of Rome. Nor can the change really be explained by the slow spread of ideas; the Romans were not such fools that it took them 200 years to understand the phalanx. Lendon looks instead at the basic questions of how nations were organized and why men and nations fight. (They do not fight, you may be sure, just to win battles.) Lendon argues that ancient nations selected weaponry and battle formations that reflected the basic structure of their societies and allowed them to achieve their goals. The wars of the classical Greeks were mainly contests for prestige between city states, and Lendon argues that they fought hoplite battles because this best allowed one group of citizens to test their courage and civic

pride against another. The Romans of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, says Lendon, were obsessed with courage and the honor they could win for themselves and their families by feats of daring in battle, so they adopted tactics that allowed would-be heroes to perform those feats. One of Lendon's best sections describes the fascination with ancient Greek history that overtook the elite of the later Roman empire. In the later empire the Romans abandoned the methods of fighting that had won them their empire in the first place. But instead of adopting new innovations they generally looked backward, copying as best they understood them the tactics of Alexander and even Agamemnon. They often seemed to be battling, not the forces arrayed against them, but the shadow of Madecon or Troy, and as we know, any victories they won against those ghosts did their own society precious little good. For anyone interested in either ancient warfare or why things change, this book is a great discovery.

JE Lendon's "Soldiers and Ghosts" provides a unique survey of Greek and Roman warfare from 400 BCE to the late Roman Empire, emphasizing how much the Greeks and Romans consciously emulated the past, or at least emulated the idealized past as they understood it from ancient authors. The most successful armies, Lendon contends, were those who could blend the lessons of the past (as understood) with the social and cultural realities of their own time. I found his exploration of Roman military practice from the Early Republic to Late Empire to be most interesting, evolving -- although I am not certain "evolution" is necessarily the most accurate word -- from use of a Macedonian-style phalanx to maniples to cohorts and back to a phalanx. He emphasizes the traditional tension in the Roman army between "virtus" (more or less individual heroics, often in defiance of orders) and "disciplina" (disciplined organization under control of the commanders). If anyone conceives of the Roman army at any time being a machinelike organization of perfect discipline, Lendon's book should cure that view; Roman generals of all eras were often faced with the repeated problem of their soldiers -- not just eager young aristocratic officers but also common footsoldiers -- insisting on launching themselves into quick battle when prudence and common sense would dictate restraint. Lendon also emphasizes the importance of competition between individuals and, especially among the Romans, units as a force behind better training and performance in battle.

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