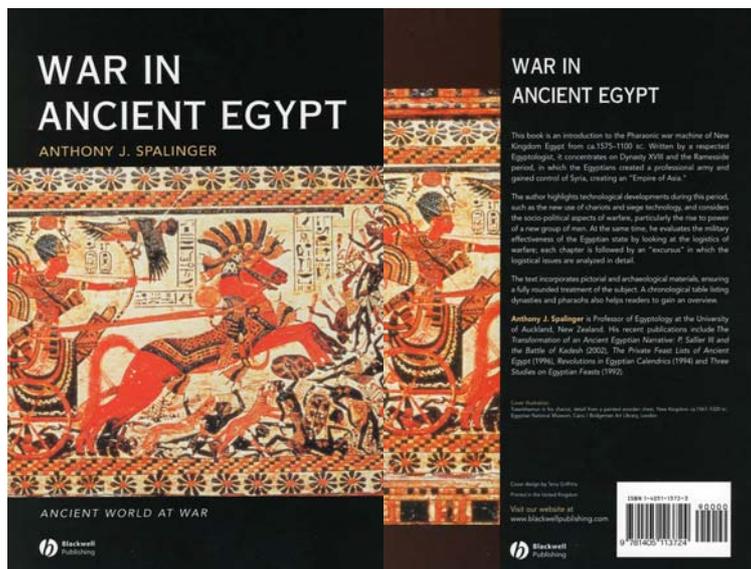


Spalinger, A.J. 2005. War in ancient Egypt – Oxford, Blackwell Publishing (Ancient World at War Series)

Book review by M. Signore



The title of this book is somewhat deceiving, because after the first few pages it delves into the politics and logistics of the military cast in ancient Egypt, but leaves little space for discussion on war itself. However we should not forget that, after all, battles and weapons are just a very small part in any military campaign. Preparation, economics, logistics, and politics all lie at the foundations of a well prepared war campaign and may be instrumental in determining sheer success or complete failure.

‘War in ancient Egypt’ is unique in that it provides a picture of all factors surrounding a military campaign, with emphasis on imperial Egypt, mostly focusing on pharaohs from the 28th and 29th Dynasties. Spalinger’s work is highly informative, rich in facts and figures, accompanied by updated cross references and offers numerous comparisons between Egyptian armies and ancient and modern ones. The author describes in great detail data such as the amount of food and water supplies needed for both animals and men, march speed, forced march and campaign movements, logistics between battles, and so on. While part of the book provides an almost pictorial description of the Egyptian army in movement, the rest examines in detail the hierarchy of the army, from leaders and warlords to soldiers.

Some famous battles are examined in more detail, again not from a battlefield point of view, but from a logistical and almost managerial one. We learn how and why Thutmose III went to battle at Megiddo, and what may have happened in preparation of the famous battle of Qadesh in which Ramses II was involved. All the strategic, logistical and political objectives of the campaigns are highlighted, but the battles themselves receive only a cursory treatment.

All chapters end with an excursus: a series of notes on the subject just treated in the chapter. A noteworthy feature is the comparative literature covering battles from other epochs and countries. A minor criticism is that the book has little to do with war itself: there is little discussion on weapons, armours, vehicles, and tactics, little about training, and almost nothing about battle engagements. Another criticism concerns the lack of paragraphs. The author often skips rapidly from one subject to another, especially in the first third of the book; despite the presence of an analytical index, finding information of interest is not easy. Spalinger’s writing style is often very dense and difficult to follow. The almost complete lack of pictures, illustrations and maps is also frustrating, especially if one is not familiar with the political geography of ancient Asia and Africa. In addition, Spalinger merely cites ancient civilizations without telling us where they came from or where they lived.

Overall, I recommend this book to anybody interested in polemology (that is, the science of war) and military history; some sections are extremely informative to Egyptologists; some sections could even be recommended to historical re-enactors due to the good logistical and social information about ancient armies and their behaviour outside the battlefield.

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