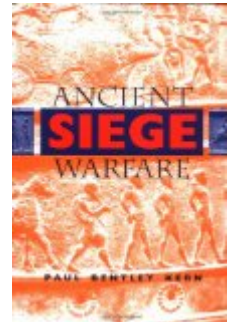


**Paul Bentley Kern.** *Ancient Siege Warfare*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. 432 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-33546-3.



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This book covers the history of siege warfare in the Near East and Europe from the Neolithic period through the early Roman Empire. In his introduction, Kern makes it clear that the book will have a strong interest in the effect of siege warfare on the civilian population, especially on women and children, and the structure of the book bears this out (pp. 4-5). Kern has divided the book into five sections, each of which contains two or three chapters. One of the chapters in each section is always entitled "Treatment of Captured Cities," while the remaining chapters in each section are concerned with the tactical and technical factors of siege warfare.

I will take up the tactical and technical factors first. As Kern notes, some aspects of these two factors remained constant during the period covered by his book. There was a constant interplay between fortifications and siege equipment, for example, and as one would expect, fortifications were developed to deal with the current state of siege equipment. Kern discusses those developments in a clear and concise manner, pointing out that during many periods the defense kept

ahead of the offense. He also details the problems faced by armies besieging such fortifications. To be maintained, sieges required a large labor force, adequate resources, and strong control, and Kern provides a thoughtful discussion of these problems in each section of the work.

The first chapter of the book provides an explanation of most of the equipment and tactics of siege warfare and supplies an explanation of how devices such as battering rams, towers, ramps and ladders were employed. The reader is also introduced to the difference between active and passive sieges as well as developments in the construction of defensive walls.

In the remainder of the book, Kern continues this story, detailing the improvements in equipment and in defensive measures that occurred in both Ancient Near Eastern and Western siege warfare during the period. The first two sections of the book provide accounts of Ancient Near Eastern sieges drawn from both literary and archaeological sources.

In Part Three, Kern turns to the Greeks. The Greeks, he finds, had contact with the Near East,

but lagged behind in siegecraft. In explaining this shortcoming, Kern accepts Thucydides' explanation that the Greeks were constrained by a lack of money, and he adds that they also suffered from deficiencies in logistical support and manpower. Although Kern addresses the Greek use of citizen militia, he fails to place sufficient emphasis on the fact that until the Peloponnesian/27 Year War, this force could not be kept in the field for more than a few months at a time.

Kern does credit the Greeks with the construction of good fortifications. He contends however, that Greek works could not have withstood an attack by forces employing the methods of the Near East, and he finds that until the end of the Peloponnesian/27 Year War, Greek siege tactics usually consisted of isolating cities and starving them into submission (p. 96).

Chapter Seven of the book is devoted to a discussion of the Greeks on Sicily, especially Dionysius I of Syracuse. This period was really the beginning of siegecraft for the Greeks, a fact Kern attributes to contacts and conflict with Carthage. Catapults and other equipment became prominent, and Philip II and Alexander III of Macedon added other improvements such as the use of a corps of engineers and the employment of stone-throwing catapults. For the most part, however, these additions consisted mainly of improvements to existing equipment and the expanded use of this equipment. The last part of the book considers the Romans.

In each section of the book Kern supplies numerous examples of sieges, and this raises a problem. He seems to consider every taking of a fortified position to be a siege, even if the position fell in a day. This is particularly notable in his account of Alexander the Great. His accounts of defensive and offensive measures employed in extended actions, however, are good.

The chapters on the "Treatment of Captured Cities" also offer many examples drawn from sources including texts from the Near East, the

Bible, Homer, Greek tragedy, and Roman accounts. In each of the chapters he emphasizes the point that siege warfare was war on the entire population rather than simply war between opposing military forces. He vividly describes the effect of such warfare on women and children, and although he never explicitly makes the point that the treatment of the population did not change over time, the examples he provides indicate that such was the case. Kern also offers an explanation of the propaganda and psychological objectives that led to the harsh treatment of civilian populations (see, for example, p. 69 and Ch. 6). I would suggest that this subject could have been addressed in a single chapter, but other readers might prefer the plethora of examples Kern provides from each time period.

I would also have preferred a more detailed discussion of technical and tactical developments, but the treatment of the inhabitants of besieged cities is obviously very important to Kern. As he notes in the opening of his Epilogue, "The reader, like the military historian, may by now yearn for privacy to scream in horror" (p. 352). The book also suffers from a lack of maps and the illustrations provided are sometimes unclear and generally inadequate (see, for example fig. 8, p. 48).

In general, however, *Ancient Siege Warfare* is a very good introduction to the subject, and Kern's full bibliography and extensive notes suggest numerous sources for readers seeking more detailed and technical discussions of the points raised.

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