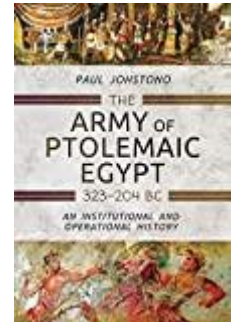


Paul Johstono. *The Army of Ptolemaic Egypt 323 to 204 BC: An Institutional and Operational History.* Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2020. Illustrations. xxxi + 344 pp. \$42.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4738-3383-8.



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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Paul Johstono's *The Army of Ptolemaic Egypt 323-204 BC: An Institutional and Operational History* is, as the title says, a study of the Ptolemaic army. The book is in many ways a traditional academic monograph, weighing in on relatively arcane matters in the field and assuming the reader's knowledge of classical military history at least to a graduate-student level as well as a decent grounding in ancient Greek military terminology, which is not always translated or transliterated for the reader. Design choice and expectations aside, Johstono presents a rather interesting study of the Ptolemaic army, published in the same year as Michael J. Taylor's volume, *Soldiers and Silver: Mobilizing Resources in the Age of Roman Conquest*, comparing the armies of the great powers of the Mediterranean in the same period.[1] While Johstono argues against the simple narrative of "glory-then-decline" for the Ptolemaic army and rejects that mold, the study is nevertheless largely restricted in time to the period of "glory" (p. xx). Johstono's work is notable because of its extensive

use of Egyptian papyri—the remnants of a vast body of bureaucratic paperwork.

The volume is bookended in both the first and final chapter by the famous Battle of Raphia (217 BC), where the Ptolemaic army broke the invading Seleucid force. In several ways, the volume examines the development of the army, leading up to this great battle, and traces the history of the army's varied elements.

The second and third chapters focus on the first Ptolemy and the wars of the Diadochi over Alexander's empire. Ptolemy's strategy in securing Egypt was largely defensive and perhaps due also to residual loyalty to the royal Argead line (to which he was perhaps distantly related himself), for he did not claim the throne of Egypt until nearly twenty years after Alexander's death. Ptolemaic Egypt was not solely the Nile River valley up to the First Cataract but also included Cyprus, Cyrenaica, and numerous (and changing) Aegean possessions, and these northern possessions served as crucial recruiting grounds for the army.

Ptolemy's task was to build up a sustainable and reliable military force to replace his aging veterans, one that he shrewdly accomplished.

The Ptolemies sought to lure experienced troops to Egypt through grants of farmland. Ad hoc at first, and then more systematically, the rulers sought to turn expensive mercenaries into local landowners. These cleruch soldiers served as the backbone of the Ptolemaic army throughout the period under study and much of Johstono's work encompasses analyses of the documents that these soldiers left behind. Ethnicity in the army (the subject of chapter 4 in particular) is hard to pin down; for example, "Macedonian" is often used flexibly to describe citizens of varying origins, Alexandrian Jews may be present in the record as Alexandrians or Macedonians, and the "Persian" cavalry may indicate style and equipment rather than origin. The complicated analysis is nevertheless crucial, as whatever its makeup, the early Ptolemaic army was an ethnically diverse force that had the duty not only of defending the borders but also of keeping the local Egyptian population under control. This is not to say that the Egyptians were excluded from the Ptolemaic army, but they were never included in the same ratio as the population

During the mid-third century, the kingdom's wealth boomed. Chapters 5 and 6 cover this wealthy age. These chapters describe elephant-hunting expeditions in the South as crucial military exercises, especially for the the cavalry, while outlining the tremendous growth of the Ptolemaic navy and its role in the Aegean and further conflicts with the Seleucids over Syria and Judea. In addition, this period was marked by an expedition against the Ethiopians and conflicts with the Macedonians over the Aegean. The mid-third century was thus marked by troop activity on the edges of empire, alongside a mixture of mercenary and cleruch forces.

Johstono then supplements his already impressive study of papyri with literary narratives to

rebuild a more thorough account of the Third Syrian War. These records elucidate the extensive mobilization undertaken. Despite extensive victories, the Ptolemies appear to have had little intent to recreate Alexander's empire. The literary sources assert that a revolt caused a retreat, yet little evidence of this can be found in the papyri, provoking a puzzle. The papyri do indicate, in the following decades, first a reorganization and apparent enlargement of the old cavalry units and second a reorganization of the training and mobilization of the infantry, though this second reorganization does not quite match the account of Polybius.

In the late third century, the Ptolemies accelerated the integration of Egyptians into the Egyptian army, a move seen as ultimately fatal by ancient and modern commenters alike. Johstono argues (and I concur) that even though this integration likely did contribute to the independence movements of the Great Revolt (206-185 BC), Ptolemaic Egypt could not have long continued to sustain its borders by means of recruitment from a mere 10 percent of its population, especially as Egypt began to lose its Aegean possessions. The shift was therefore necessary, and the later Ptolemies continued to recruit troops from a wider base in the second and first centuries.

Johstono tends to pose ancient quandaries in an interesting fashion, which emphasizes the decisions that had to be made. He avoids presenting decisions as good or poor in favor of elucidating the decision-making process. Moreover, he exhibits an extensive command over the varied papyri sources. Johstono evinces familiarity with many of the puzzles of the period, such as the location of the Camel's Fort or the question of the "War of the Syrian Succession" (p. 115).

There are some notable absences. Johstono's interesting analysis of the Great Revolt in the conclusion deserved a chapter in its own right. The Ptolemaic seaborne and riverine navy was crucially important logistically, even if it underwhelmed on a tactical level, and is mentioned only

in passing (and may also have reflected a greater proportion of local Egyptian recruits). Missing also is further discussion of the Jewish troops and generals, who served an important secondary role. Aside from the interesting discussion of Ananias and the role of Alexandrian Jews, Johstono omits further discussion or really any question of the role of religion for soldiers in the Ptolemaic army. A glossary of the many untranslated terms would have been a useful addition, as would an index of the papyrological abbreviations and citations. There are also inconsistencies in transliteration, such as Decapolis versus Dekapolis and minor typos and missing spaces, but the production value

is otherwise high, including of maps and color plates.

Overall, Johstono's work provides a good study of the Ptolemaic army and its relation to the Ptolemaic state, asks good, pointed questions about the ethnicity of the various troops that made up the Ptolemaic force, and challenges the narrative of decadence and decline in the Egyptian army.

Note

[1]. I mention this volume as the two books sometimes talk past each other in interesting ways.

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