

Jeremy ARMSTRONG and Matthew TRUNDLE: *Brill's Companion to Sieges in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean Sea*,  
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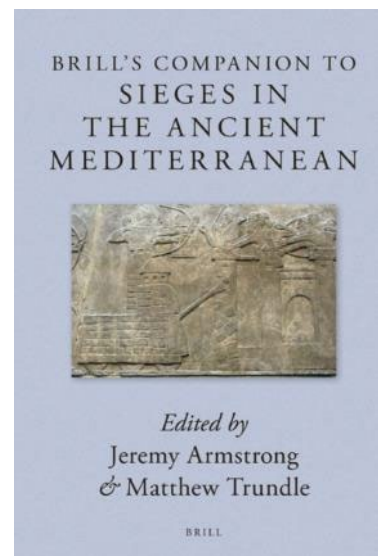
James Bowden

### Studying Ancient Sieges

Sieges have become an increasingly important area of scholarly attention and are a feature of many monographic studies of varying quality. A scan of popular book selling platforms reveals a wide range of books that either look at sieges from an overall approach or concentrate on more specific sieges; Jerusalem, Acre, Vicksburg, and others. The quality of the authors, research, and presentation is uneven and in most of the instances is not by professional historians nor by specialists within the specific area of consideration. Most of the books are written by historical writers who have developed greater skills in the area of communication. This means that the vast amount of writing on the topic is vague, potentially liable to uncritical acceptance of prima facial writing or denial of details, or not properly contextualizing the information. Sieges often provide strong personal and introspective moments for character development and exploring different angles of issues and so provide for some authors an opportunity to explore certain favorite historical figures. In the scholarly area, sieges are much less developed and the wide range of literature on the popular level belies the almost equal neglect that sieges have received on the specialist level. However, specialist studies do not in all circumstances equal better due to the fact that, while scholarly sources may cover the fact in a more critical and greater historical methodological respect, the essential emotion and impact of the siege on both sides may be lost in the near antiseptic recitation.

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As a research historian whose focus has been on the military history of the Middle East and as a history instructor at The Shildeg School and English (International) School of Mongolia, both in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, I was greatly anticipating engaging with this book as I have been seeking better and more condensed sources on ancient sieges with which to present to my students the topic and perhaps provide them with



semester required reading. The scholarly void in research on sieges has been filled a bit more by the volume being reviewed here in the *Brill Companion on Ancient Sieges in the Eastern Mediterranean* but there are some critical deficiencies.

The *Brill Companion to Ancient Eastern Mediterranean Sieges* is a work that exists within an uneasy tension when dealing with two highly different areas of specialty, the ancient Near East and the ancient Greco-Roman spheres. The most valuable aspect of this volume is that it reduces what is usually available among many different texts, both primary and secondary and condenses it into one single volume which is more easily taught from than from a wide range of sources. It is also an important step towards codifying and presenting in a single volume, much of what can usually be understood only after a wide amount of historiographical encounter.

The book as a whole is largely on the topic of ancient sieges and reflects a bias towards Classical studies with eight out of 14 chapters being devoted to Greek, Roman, and Successor sieges or issues. The ancient Near East received only four chapters with two being focused on Assyria and two on Egypt. Three chapters deal with broader issues; terrain and geography, women and their role in sieges, and a chapter which looked at sieges from the standpoint of sieges as a literary genre and considered wholly Greco-Roman sources. The Assyrians are appropriately heavily represented, however, Sumerian and Akkadian antecedents are once again left out and there is a question as to whether any specialists in that area were invited to participate, or were aware of the project. The Akkadians did have some possessions that touched the Mediterranean Sea. We are also lacking anything concerning the Babylonians, who also conquered areas touching on the Mediterranean (I will qualify and highlight the importance of this critique below in the broader comments section). The Egyptians are then featured prominently in two chapters and then, the aforementioned, focus is largely placed on Roman sources and sieges with Greek events and Successor sieges coming in lesser. There is also the epilogue which is in essence a final chapter and constitutes a solid resolution or at least acknowledgement of the contradictory stances of some of the authors. The work as a whole is solid, scholarly, and at times engaging. There are two chapters that stood out to me as being particularly more off-topic than they should have been, chapters 5 and 11. The lack of topical continuity is the most problematic of both of these issues and the source of it is one that Brill should have been far more cognizant of and addressed, and it reflect poorly on Brill. I will deal with more of the specifics below but it is important to state that the reason for their inclusion appears to more personally than professionally driven.

The of the least topical and overly specialized chapters is chapter 11 entitled, “Voluntarii at the Gates: Irregular Recruitment and the Siege of Veii” which is an examination of potential volunteer soldiers at the siege of Veii. The author, James Crook, explored not sieges or a specific siege but the use of the word *volunerii* in Roman

historical sources and the possible presence of these soldiers at the siege of Veii. The author mentions the various debates about whether this siege actually took place, he mentions that it is one of the most important sieges of Roman history, and it is the concluding act of a total of three wars between Rome and Veii. Why these aspects were not explored is not understandable. The article is well-written and well-researched but it does not offer any specific content towards understanding sieges in the Roman world nor does it substantially contribute to the overall topic. The topic could have served as a useful entre into the main topic, and I was anticipating that it would eventually transition but it never did. It would have been interesting to glimpse or explore how Veii might, or might not, have been invested, and what would have been involved. However, the author never gives the reader a reason why there should such significance into the presence or lack of presence of volunteers at the siege. The chapter does not indicate if the presence of the volunteers versus conscripted soldiers made meaningful impact, either positively or negatively, on the course or outcome of the siege. Further, if there is a strong historiographical debate about the actual event then there must be significant issues either surrounding the literary tradition or how it would have been carried out on a practical basis, either one of which issues, or both, would have made for compelling reading and interest. Instead, we have a dry, and highly field specific recitation that assumes much on the part of the reader that cannot be assumed. The discussion of the presence of volunteers or their use in the Roman army, or even the linguistic analysis could have been reserved for a respected military history journal like the present one.

The second chapter that widely and completely ignores the very heart of the volume is chapter 5 entitled, “The ‘Development’ of Egyptian Assault Warfare”. The author, Brett H Heagren, very explicitly states on the first page that, “The term ‘assault warfare’ is used here to describe an attack on a fortified target...and should be considered distinct from ‘siege warfare’...” So, why is this chapter even included? What does it matter that we understand the development of Egyptian assault warfare and its development in a text that is supposed to be devoted to sieges and a chapter where siege is only slightly touched upon and rapidly dismissed? The chapter does not offer any information on sieges that could not have been included in the first Egyptian themed chapter leaving room for the addition of a chapter on some other much needed to explore issues. The chapter only briefly glimpses sieges and mainly discusses fortifications and some of these do not appear to have been besieged at all, merely bypassed, while forts that were besieged only get brief mention. It was disappointing that the study could not have been more focused and there is a very disappointing reason for its inclusion.

While in general most reviewers eschew the giving of content advice, in this particular instance it is felt that there are two glaring omissions that must be clearly elucidated in the hopes that a future volume or even second edition may correct. The volume

should have used one of these chapters, or both, to explore two much more important and potentially teachable aspects of sieges. There should have been a chapter that codified and incapsulated the experience of those inside of the city under siege and what the trauma that they experienced was like. It is not unscholarly to offer detailed, enhanced explorations of these sufferings and can be a needed palliative of looking at the subject from an overly detached manner. It is not unscholarly to heighten the emotional toll and impact of a siege. This is often where popular histories succeed and become more useful than scholarly sources because the author is willing to get inside the trenches, or homes, with the civilians, and raise the stakes. The author sketches pictures and creates mental experiences that suck readers into the narrative. If it were to come from a scholar rather than simply a writer the emotion and scenes can come across with even more authority, clarity, and can grab a wider readership in schools.

The second chapter that this volume lacks is one in which many of themes are encapsulated into a single case study. This offers a better capstone than a chapter that might potentially undermine any credibility in the effort by undermining the sources on which it is based. By offering a description of one siege that incorporated as many of the themes presented in the work as a whole there would have been a greater amplification of the major themes while also offering greater applicational depth in which the text could be offered to a wider range of students and those interested in the topic and want to rise above the amateur levels of historical knowledge.

The siege of Masada has many themes that are represented in the work; themes of textual criticism and questions about the primary source, notably Josephus. It features a siege operation conducted by the Romans in the Near East and a rugged environment which was not favorable to siege operations. The siege lasted many months and the final outcome was less than climatic, however, it does represent one of the many potential outcomes that besiegers may encounter, the hard work and effort being rendered meaningless by the mass suicide of those inside, thus making the whole effort a moot point and hollow victory. The siege of Jerusalem during the Jewish Wars is another example of the above, with important but no fewer engaging caveats.

While the work overall is solid, there are elements within each sphere in which the authors took for granted the background knowledge of their audience and gave too little cognizance to the reality that specialists from both areas would be reading the work, potentially as a whole and not remaining only in their respective areas. In companion, multi-disciplinary works that stretch between geographical and historical zones and eras, it is preferable that volumes and individual chapters do not engage in overly narrowed topics which assume that the reader has deeper historiographical familiarity with the topic at hand. It is clear that the author of chapter 11 was approaching the topic from a standpoint of having a great depth in the historiography of the topic but failed bringing that out to a wider, less knowledgeable audience. Chapter 5 was wholly

unrelated and completely at variance with the stated intent of the greater work. Again, both chapters could have stood on their own as excellent papers in journals but not within a text of this intent. Antecedent examples of sieges conducted by the Sumerians, Akkadians, or Babylonians could have been brought into the text and used to demonstrate the deep antiquity of sieges and introduce more students to these primary civilizations.

It should be noted that the editors are Classicists dealing with Greco-Roman military history and this may have led to a topical blind spot. Another blind spot is that both Brett H Heagren and James Crook, authors of the two unrelated chapters, are at the same Auckland University as the editors and / or had previous educational connections with the editors at Auckland University. This type of manuscript required a wider net to be cast in calling for chapters that more closely hewed to the intent. The abundant preference for Greco-Roman sources and historical incidents should have further led to the modification of the title and perhaps even the dropping of the four ancient Near East chapters in favor of creating two separate volumes, one for ancient Near East and a second for Classics studies. This would have enabled the editors to avoid approaching the Near East in a less than complete manner. Therefore, it could be used for reference for researchers and senior level courses through graduate studies, but as far as textbook for the freshman and sophomore level, many of its issues and approaches may be well over the head of those students.