

Bartosz Kontny. 2023. *The Archaeology of War: Studies on Weapons of Barbarian Europe in the Roman and Migration Periods* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 260p., 139 illustr., pbk, ISBN 978-2-503-60737-5)

*The Archaeology of War* is a data-oriented, well researched, and concise work that is a welcome and important addition to the academic literature on warfare and weapons of pre-modern Europe in general, and in various regions of Roman and Migration period Poland in particular. The book focuses specifically on the Przeworsk Culture, Wielbark Culture, and the West Balk Circle Culture. This work is an English language updated edition of a 2019 Polish language version of the book, *Archeologia wojny. Ze studiów nad uzbrojeniem barbarzyńskiej Europy okresów wpływów rzymskich i wędrówek ludów*. Not able to read Polish myself, I am unsure of the differences between the two editions, though the layout and chapter titles remain the same.

The book is split into five chapters, with a very brief, one-page Introductory section. *The Archaeology of War* is a detailed compendium of the current knowledge of weapons, armour, horse tack, warrior burials and water/bog deposits as war rituals in Roman to Migration Period Poland, with ample cross-cultural contemporary comparisons of all of the above, as well as selected historic predecessors. It utilizes a combination of archaeological data, published or previously unpublished weapons collections, and historical texts, particularly from Roman historical accounts. The chronology is split into five phases, more simply titled A through E, from late pre-Roman Period to the late Migration Period, primarily as a relative chronology, without spending much time on any controversies or issues of chronology. This is intentional, as explained in the Introduction, in order to focus the reader more on the data than on this larger conversation. This dynamic can

make aspects of the book somewhat confusing, as the time period is not always clearly stated, but it is a reasonable choice for this type of work, meant for a general audience.

While the volume covers a wide range of information, the chapters read like individual articles on the various subject matters, with little to no cohesion to the work, or callback within each chapter to subjects or data covered previously. Each chapter is differently organized, though none has much of an introductory or conclusion section to either set up or summarize the main points of each chapter, which can make reading the book in its entirety more difficult. Only Chapters 3 and 4 contain subsections. In the remaining chapters, no subsections were used, so while the information was often very well written, the change from topic to topic was at times stark and without clear transitions which can leave the reader a bit adrift at times.

According to the Introduction, the book is meant for a general audience with an interest in ancient armaments or warfare tactics. While the writing style itself is very clear and accessible, some of the terminology is at times left undefined, such as the use of terms like “Barbarian Europe,” or the names or locations of various cultures covered in the book. If a reader was not previously aware of the Przeworsk, Wielbark, or the West Balk Circle cultures, the book does not easily inform them of where they were located or their particular cultural traits. Additionally, a simple map in an earlier section of the book would have greatly helped a reader with less knowledge of Polish or northern European geography to understand the locations of these cultures. Unfortunately, no such map was included. Instead, the

maps found throughout the book rarely have a reference to their geographical location, or such common map practices as a north arrow or scale.

However, the ample illustrations found throughout the book were highly appreciated. All weapons, armour, horse tack, and grave types covered in the text were illustrated, so that the weapons typologies created or presented in this work were well attested. Each chapter contains representative illustrations of all objects and typologies mentioned in the text, collected from a wide variety of archives, publications and museums. These illustrations in and of themselves make this book an important contribution to the field and are an excellent resource for anyone interested in pre-modern weaponry, especially anyone who may want to recreate ancient weapons. In particular, the beautiful colour drawings by Stanislaw Kontny found throughout the book, with full reconstructions of warriors, weaponry, armour, and ceremonies, were an absolute highlight, and made the textual reconstructions themselves come alive. Occasional photographs of active, living reenactments of fully dressed “warriors” and their recreated weapons, often taken from various archaeological festivals in the last few decades, further speak to this possibility.

Chapter 1 focuses on Roman and Migration period weapons, armour and related materials recovered from what the author calls “Lake Deposits,” and largely consist of materials recovered from what are now bogs, as well as modern rivers and lakes. Grave goods are also covered, when present. The chapter establishes changes to war technology in a chronological fashion, with a nicely written history of similar technologies throughout pre-Roman Europe, with a particular emphasis on earlier Greek and Celtic materials, and their influence on Polish culture. There is perhaps too much of a wide range of influences through time: when trying to find

their influence on Poland, it feels too broad, though it remains a useful overview. The chapter also has much to say about the use of ritual sacrifice of weapons and related goods, both in water deposits and in graves, and possible symbolic meanings behind such acts. Finally, this chapter also makes some interesting reconstructions of warrior hierarchy into a three-tiered system of chieftains (*principes*), foot soldiers (*comites*), and infantrymen (*pedites*), along with their particular styles of weapons, armour, clothing, and possible combat styles, with some analysis of religious iconography on weapons. Overall, there is some very interesting interpretation and recreation from the data presented.

Chapter 2 focuses entirely on the Przeworsk Culture, and what can be known of the warriors of this culture from recovered weapons and warfare related materials, almost entirely burial goods. The author states that there is nearly none known from water deposits that can be traced to this culture. The Przeworsk are correlated with the Vandals in this text. This chapter sets up a typology of weapons related to this culture through time, with associated understandings and reconstructions of how this would reflect changes to the culture and combat styles. At times, this chapter meanders somewhat from topic to topic, but ultimately it creates a clear picture of what is currently known about the war-related artefacts from this culture.

Chapter 3 covers the Wielbark Culture, linking them to the Goths. This chapter is the weakest of the book, particularly as there is little here to situate a reader unfamiliar with the Wielbark Culture. The author states that much less is known about this particular group, and the dataset of excavated material culture is far smaller than for the other peoples covered in this book, so the material covered is necessarily different. Much of the chapter, therefore, is a textual listing of the known weapons

and associated materials from this time period and region, often nearly in list form, which made it harder to read and follow, with far less discussion and reconstruction compared to other chapters in the book. This chapter is more of a publication of a database of known materials, with less associated interpretation.

Chapter 4 centres on the Balt peoples and their weapons. This chapter, a highlight of the book, also contains an attempt to reconstruct data from Balt materials that have been lost or destroyed since their excavation, often due to destruction of museums in World War II, which makes for interesting analyses. The maps presented in this chapter are clearer, containing both scales and norths arrows. Additionally, more information on the history of excavations within the region is presented, including some frank discussions of some of their shortcomings. The chapter also contains clear subsections, often with helpful short introductions. A clear chronology of all of the associated materials nicely lays out what is known about this culture and its weapons and armour. This chapter primarily covers the Roman period, as less is known archaeologically about the Balts in the Migration Period. The chapter once more discusses possible combat styles through time, possible allies, and outside influences on the Balt Culture, and creates a clear typology of weapons through time, such as spears, swords, axes, shields, etc.

Chapter 5 is an outlier in the book, as it is entirely about shields, and covers ground already discussed in earlier chapters. Instead of focusing on a single culture or geographical region, this chapter instead discusses

shields throughout Europe in general, and the concept of the “Germanic” shield in particular. There is a short, modern ethnographic analysis of how shields may have evolved, and how shape informs the function of shields, as well as the various materials shields can be made from and their effectiveness. The chapter draws from ancient Greek depictions, and continues until the end of the Migration Period, with changes to shield materials, size, and shapes through time. It again correlates combat reconstructions with shield types. This chapter is a nice addition to scholarship on shields in Europe, although it does not fit seamlessly into the discussion put forth in earlier chapters.

Overall, *The Archaeology of War* organizes a wide array of data on the history of warfare in Roman and Migration Period Poland for the general reader. While the book would benefit from greater cohesion, Kontny presents artefacts, collections, archives and illustrations that had not previously been published, and often creates intriguing reconstructions of battle tactics based on these materials. It is an excellent reference book and will be useful for future scholars looking to study weapons and fighting styles of the time periods and cultures covered. The drawings and illustrations in particular greatly add to this, making for a very handsome volume.

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