Lessons of the Ancients: Thinking About War in Early Modern England

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Abstract:
Early modern English warfare has been harshly treated in twentieth-century historiography: while historians put out sweeping works touting, and debating, the grand military achievements of early modern Europe, England found itself berated for its apparent backwardness and inefficiency. However, recent trends not only in reconsidering the effectiveness and needs of early modern English warfare, but also in debating the extent of the Greco-Roman influence over early modern culture in general, warrant a re-examination of early modern English warfare altogether. Given the large number of works available at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries on warfare in England, and the fact that most controversy concerning the “military revolution” relates to this period, this work focuses on military literature compiled at the end of the sixteenth century. Through examining nine different authors of different backgrounds, military experiences, educations, and opinions, it sets out to provide an answer to the question: What was the influence of the ancients on Early Modern English military thought? The answer it provides recognizes that ancient authority vied with modern continental practice and the unique circumstances and traditions of English warfare in shaping the ideas of these writers. Sixteenth-century England was neither backward nor inept in matters of military theory. Instead, the English were very aware of and engaged in the same military debates as their contemporaries on the continent. As were contemporary continental theorists, the English writers were respectful of ancient authority but also selective in their borrowings from antiquity. Most importantly, they demonstrated a strong sense that English circumstances were in important respects unique. Given their particular circumstances, the result of their understanding of continental warfare was a theory and practice that was unique in its own right – an English Art of War.

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