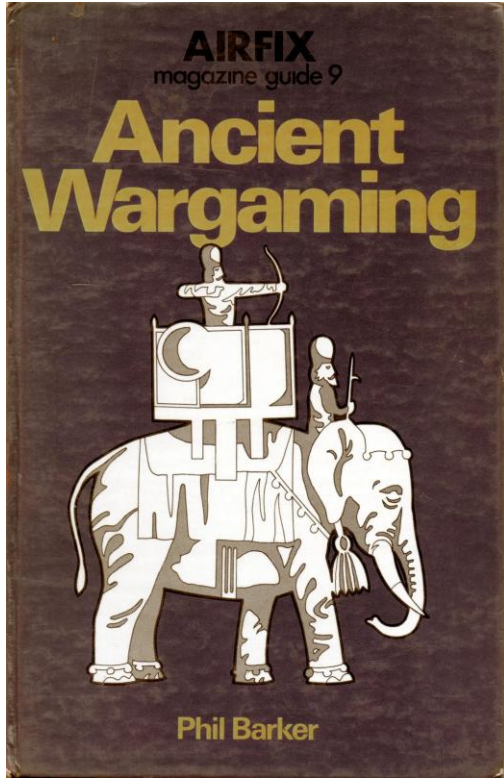


'Ancient Wargaming' (Airfix Guide Number 9) by Phil Barker

Review by Jonathan Aird



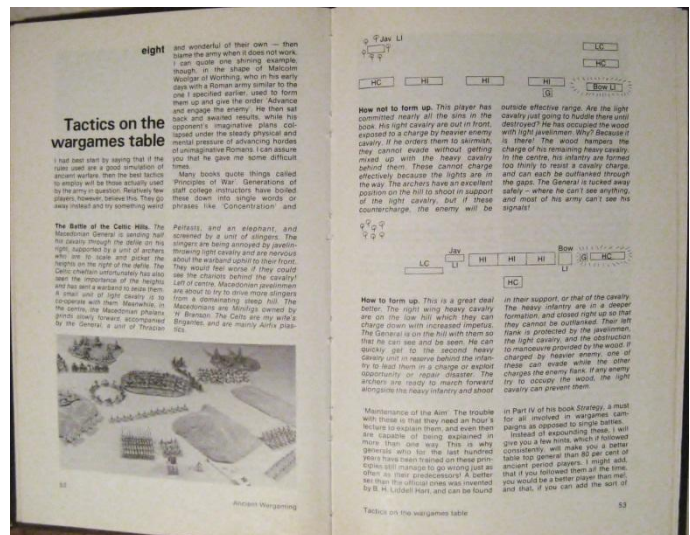
The book which Phil Barker refers to as "the purple primer" was one of my earliest wargaming purchases -- and because of this looms large in my memory. It is an odd-sized hardback book of some 64 pages -- text-heavy but with plenty of line illustrations (borrowed from WRG publications) and reproductions of black and white photographs of figures and battles in progress. The Airfix Guide series -- unsurprisingly -- covered mainly modelling topics, but there were a number of wargaming books in the range. This book addresses the large subject of ancient period wargaming and the specific application of the WRG rules to the gaming of this period -- an unusual approach as most of the other wargaming topic books in the series endeavoured to include a set of rules, as well as background material. And not only is the focus on WRG, but it's on WRG 4th edition -- which was already superseded by 5th edition by the time that I originally purchased this book. Not that this was a

great problem as most of the background information remained perfectly valid.

The book is divided into nine chapters:

Chapter One -- discusses troop types and weapons -- the various different kinds of weaponry and foot, mounted, camelry, chariots etc. that may be available to the wargamer.

Chapter Two -- discusses formations and standards of drill -- how could units of regular troops deploy into battle, what could be achieved by barbarian armies -- and why the Hollywood image of barbarians does them a disservice.



Chapter Three – discusses tactical precepts -- that is, the large-scale battlefield manoeuvres that may bring victory – both from an analysis of historical encounters but also from historical theory manuals.



Chapter Four – covers the history of ancient wargaming – Phil largely neglects the contribution of H.G. Wells, and for the most part lays the blame on Don Featherstone for his series of wargaming books, and Tony Bath for starting the Society of Ancients! This potted history unfolds as a series of amusing anecdotes about early games, the development of rival rule sets and finally the “invention” of the WRG-style morale system.

Chapter Five – is all about the WRG rules – how troops are defined, how movement works, the importance of scale and so on. It’s Phil Barker’s usual efficient sales pitch for WRG, and it leaves the reader desperate to get their hands on a copy of the rules.

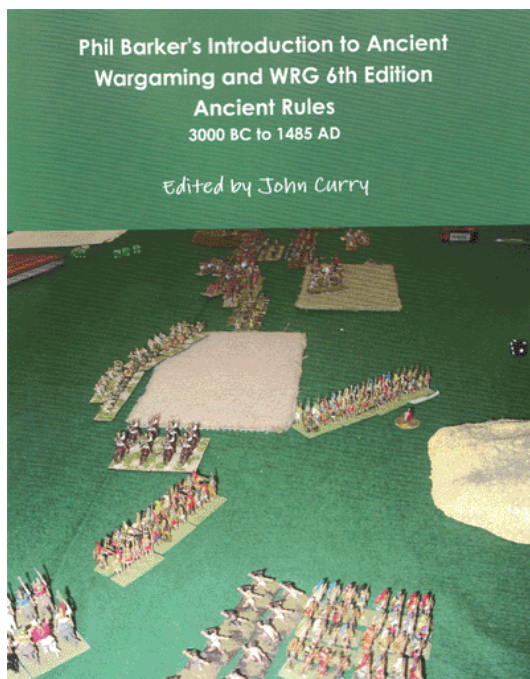
Chapter Six – discusses the all-important subject of what army to field – Phil tends to the “buy an army you can love in defeat” school of thought. Avoid a “winning” army that you don’t like, and if there’s a period of history you are particularly drawn to, then field an army from that. Sound and sensible advice, backed up with a dozen sample WRG army lists.

Chapter Seven – is all about how to actually go about raising a model army, where to get figures, how to paint them and so on. What a reminder of how far we’ve travelled since 1974, when this book was published – there were barely a half dozen manufacturers making 25mm figures in those days, and the buyer had to pick and choose carefully. As this is an Airfix book -- and recalling the limited number of plastic figures available at the time of printing -- the army lists provided in the previous chapter cover all that is easily available from Airfix -- Imperial Roman and Ancient Briton. There are also some hints on converting other Airfix figures to suitable ancient warriors -- much can be made from the Robin Hood set, for example, which give a large number of lightly armoured figures with bows and, with a little conversion, slings, spears and so on. Much is left to the reader to investigate -- suitable directions to Airfix magazine are provided, for example -- and this section does have the slight feel of "contractual necessity." The survey of available metal figures was comprehensive for the time, and is an automatic nostalgia generator for gamers of a certain age!

Chapter Eight – tactics on the wargames table, advice on how to avoid blunders on setting up -- don’t grab terrain just because it is there is very sound advice! Think ahead – are your troops deployed so that they get in each other’s way, or is there a proper plan? This chapter is wonderfully illustrated with a blow-by-blow account of an actual battle played out as a “photo-story.” I read and reread this chapter many, many times – it’s full of good advice, and is so well written that it makes ancients gaming sound so – well, fun.

Chapter Nine – is barely a chapter at all, running to just two pages and trying to cover campaigns, historical battle refights and fantasy gaming (WRG 4th edition had a fantasy appendix!). It does serve to whet the appetite for campaigns and suggest a Hyborian-style game as a good example. Fantasy is all wrapped up in three paragraphs – but there is a lovely photo showing the resourceful gamer at work – medieval ranges are raided for troops and magical elements such as monks. Toy shops provide giant ravens and eagles of the misty mountains and this was necessary as there were only two proper ranges of fantasy figures, Minifigs' Mythical Earth (based on Tolkien) and Hinchliffe's Barsoom.

Since the book offers a sweeping overview of historical tactics and troops, and how to best represent them on the wargame table, very little of the information has really dated. The emphasis on WRG rules is probably the most glaring thing, as the WRG Ancients were widely replaced by the later DBx series of rules. In the recent reprint of the book, a copy of WRG 6th edition has been included, representing the end-of-the-line for this style of WRG rule set. The book is a lot of fun to read, very informative within its narrow space and still a really good primer for anyone considering wargaming the ancient period. Some people have accused Phil Barker of being a dry writer (based mainly on his rules) but in this book he comes across as affable, well informed, witty and someone you'd like to play a game against (even if you suspect he'd win !). There are many anecdotes, and some of these do show his more authoritarian side – discussing the WRG rules there is a classic comment on their level of research: “you may well find features in them that you do not agree with, but this in turn may be because we have access to information that you have not got.” Well, quite.



However, such instances are more than balanced by self-deprecating comments, such as when talking about army selection and how it is good to choose an army that matches your personality: “my own armies are Byzantine, Late Roman and Sassanid, which should imply that I am deceitful, decadent and cunning. In fact, I just like horses.”

Well worth picking up second hand if you can, or as hinted at above, it is also available as a reprint as part of John Curry's History of Wargaming project as *Phil Barker's Introduction to Ancient Wargaming and WRG 6th Edition Ancient Rules 3000BC to 1485AD*, ISBN 978-1-4452-6417-2 , £12.95.