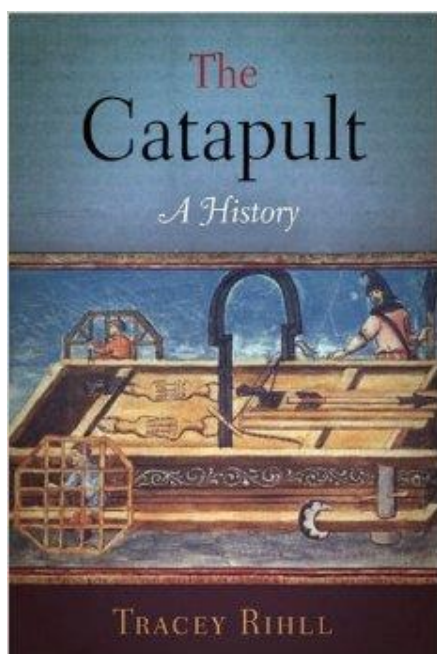


The Catapult: A History

By Tracey Rihll

Review by Rob Morgan

Recently, I had the opportunity to examine a review copy of this book. The author is a British academic at a British university, but it doesn't seem to have made an impact on this side of the Atlantic. It's one of five titles in a series called 'Weapons in History' and two of the others, also unknown to me, are 'A Revolution in Arms: A History of the First Repeating Rifle,' and 'V-2: A Combat History of the First Ballistic Missile.' Both might be of interest to SWA members.



The catapult, a term used throughout the book, sometimes to deal with bolt-shooting engines, as well as stone throwers of all types, was originally a sort of crossbow invented by the engineers of Syracuse in the fourth century BC, and which developed in Greek and Roman hands into a range of powerful and robust weapons which could strike the enemy at a distance, assault and defend cities, and arm warships. They came in all sizes and the largest bore the delightful name of 'City-Taker.' The book deals with these engines of war within a restricted timeline; from c.399 BC down to the Siege of Thessalonika in 597 AD. The opening chapter, in fact, is a decent account of the development of missile weapons in Antiquity, before the catapult; then goes on to consider the first catapult's creation and impact. There's a substantial amount of archaeological underlay to

the text, which has value for the academic reader, of course.

The book moves on to explain the development and spread of the tension catapult, and the defences upon which it relied for use. As always, the debate on terminology, familiar to anyone with an interest in medieval ordnance and engines, simmers in Rihll's pages: The ballista, the crossbow, staff sling, the onager and one or two other possibilities, some of them much later examples of engines of war, all drift into the text.

The author moves on to deal with torsion engines, and the interesting developments brought forth in Alexander the Great's wars. I should mention at this point that though there are perhaps 60 or 70 illustrations and technical drawings in this book, they are far, far fewer in number than one might have anticipated for a technical-historical examination of a well-known family of weapons. Rihll moves on to consider 'little catapults,' the smaller weapons and their missiles. Intriguing, this!

The Hellenistic period is next examined, a time of substantial experimenting in the use and the design of the catapult 'family.' Rihll ventures far beyond this era in her

comparison of the engines and their potential -- interesting to learn that in 1904 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany narrowly escaped death when watching a demonstration of a "large stone thrower." He might have provided a footnote in history as the last ruler to be killed by a stone throwing engine! The work moves on to the technical treatises of Vitruvius, and Philo, among others, and the essentially practical, rather than purely mathematical manner of building and erecting, and indeed shooting, them, becomes apparent. There was no standard blueprint, no precision engineering, for a catapult. The text then moves on to the Romanisation of this weaponry as a means of conquest and of defending those conquests. The book ends with an examination of the use of catapults in late Antiquity, up to the fall of Rome and beyond, in use with Roman forces, and with their opponents. Rihl use the term "Strikes Back at The Empire" and, once more, the odd comments on these engines well into the medieval and early modern period creep in.

The appendices are hefty, dealing with the calibration formulae, components, the known catapult remains so far discovered. There's a substantial bibliography of 20 pages in length -- it's extremely comprehensive -- and very substantial notes. One point appealed to me: the author consulted the well-known Roman re-enactment group, the Ermine Street Guard to discuss their replica catapults and how they used them. I've long felt that in ordnance terms as a whole, those who re-enact have a great deal to teach historians on how it's done in the field, not in the drill book. They have a great deal to teach wargamers too, on the use of weapons in the field.

A very substantial piece of work, well written, but sadly under-illustrated.

"The Catapult: A History," 382pp., Westholme Publishing, Pennsylvania