

GSCE candidate. This book could certainly be put in the hands of a student who is interested in words, the sort of student who may well continue with Latin after GCSE, but I am not convinced it would be effective if used on a whole-class basis.

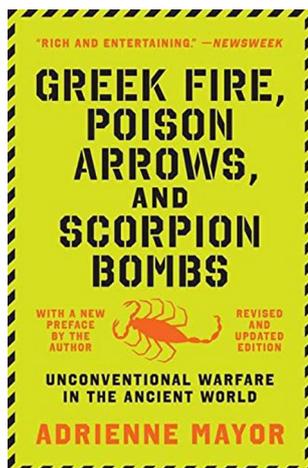
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Greek Fire, Poison Arrows, and Scorpion Bombs

Mayor (A.) Pp. xxx + 384, ills, maps, colour pls.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.
Paper, £14.99, US\$19.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-21108-4

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'Lucullus's army faced a panoply of bioterrors, from poison arrows, stinging bees, savage bears and scorpion bombs to unquenchable burning mud.' This one sentence gives a strong flavour of the content of Adrienne Mayor's revised and updated book. The author starts by bringing out vividly the contrast between our image of ancient warfare (brave soldiers with swords and shields against opponents similarly clad, in such battles as Thermopylae, Marathon and Cannae) and the 'unethical' ways in which through the centuries army leaders have

undermined the Geneva Convention and its (usually unwritten) predecessors.

Greek and Roman mythology is full of examples of the devious use of weapons armed with toxins (think of Heracles, Odysseus, Achilles and Philoctetes) and this might have inspired 'real' people to copy some of the ingenious methods of killing found in the mythology.

The author's main aims are to detail the many varieties of unpleasant ways to defeat an opponent and to show that modern scientific developments and archaeology are able to support the sometimes unlikely claims made by the ancient historians and biographers (not only of Greece and Rome but also of India and China and elsewhere). Chapter 1 gives many examples of devious practices employed by the characters of Greek mythology and will be of particular interest to Classicists.

The chapter headings give an indication of the sorts of material covered: Arrows of Doom; Poison Waters, Deadly Vapors; A Casket of Plague in the Temple of Babylon; Animal Allies (think of elephants and watch out for pigs on fire!); Infernal Fire (starting with Medea and ending with napalm in Vietnam).

Despite the sometimes grisly contents, I found this book fascinating. There seems to be no end to the ability of men (and just

occasionally women) to find inhumane ways to treat other men (and women).

I imagine it might have an appeal to those students who are devotees of online war games but is probably an unlikely purchase for a school library.

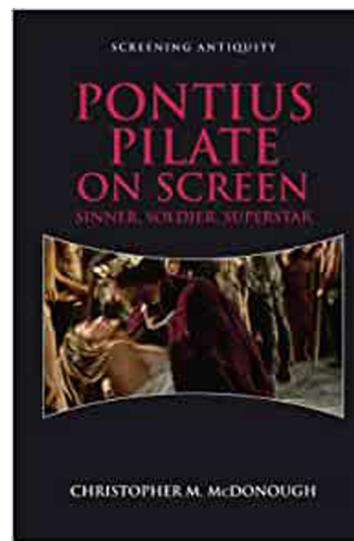
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000144

Pontius Pilate on Screen: Soldier, Sinner, Superstar

McDonough (C.) Pp 296, ills. Edinburgh
University Press, Edinburgh, 2022. Cased, £90.
ISBN: 978-1-474-44684.

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As every theologian knows, the Gospels are not works of history, but they drop clues about history which can be pieced together, though, as with every reconstruction, the way the shards of mosaic are put together will produce sometimes quite radically different pictures. No one embodies this better than Pontius Pilate, who, in the retelling of the Gospels in film, emerges as a widely differing character. As Christopher McDonough points out, the Pontius Pilate we construct tells us more about ourselves and our own

times than about the Pilate of history.

Considering that he is the most famous Roman governor of all time, very little is known about Pilate. He was the prefect of Judaea, and we know the dates of his time in office, but there is only one inscription that has come to light that gives his name, found in 1961 in Caesarea. Josephus, Philo and Tacitus mention him (the latter calls him the 'procurator', but prefect is more accurate, in keeping with the inscription), but there are immense lacunae that simply cannot be filled. In fact, if he had not had his encounter with Jesus, Pontius Pilate would have been a mere footnote of history, a nonentity. Instead, because of that encounter, he is, in the words of our author's subtitle, 'sinner, soldier, superstar'.

The tendency to fill in the gaps and satisfy the human appetite for a story is seen even more clearly in the treatment of Pilate's wife. McDonough admits that Pilate was probably married, for most Romans of his class were, but that is as far as history takes us. Saint Matthew devotes one verse to the lady: 'And while [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment-seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have

thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him' (Matthew 27:19, American Standard Version). This one verse is enough to spark off a huge afterlife for Mrs Pilate, as McDonough calls her. The gaps are filled in, and the result is Saint Procula, one of Jesus' first followers; even Claudia Procula, daughter of the Emperor Tiberius, who, as we all know, had no daughters. We all long for a story with a beginning, a middle and an end, particularly an end; Saint Matthew's tantalising hint about Pilate's domestic life is a temptation few can resist. And the same goes for Pilate himself. The room for interpretation is immense because the gospels at no point give even a hint about Pilate's inner life.

McDonough's book, which is wittily written, and a delight to read, goes through every cinematic appearance of the Prefect of Judaea, starting with the era of silent movies. Pilate's appearances on screen are remarkably short, but Pilate certainly dominates when he is on screen. McDonough analyses Mel Gibson's treatment of the Prefect in *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) with great sensitivity. Pilate is torn between the public and the private (the latter is summed up by his wife Claudia, who is sympathetic to the plight of Jesus) and he is outplayed by Caiaphas. Pilate is also torn between conscience and duty. He is played by a Bulgarian actor, Hristo Shopov, who the year before had played the warden of a gulag. Gibson's Pilate sums up the price that has to be paid for maintaining the Pax Romana, a price that is paid not just by those who are scourged and crucified, but also by those who preside over the system that metes out such punishments. McDonough sees a strong parallel between the Pax Romana and the Pax Americana.

McDonough does not like Gibson's film, with its horrific violence; he praises *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), though, and one agrees with this judgement. Reading the book will propel the reader to YouTube to refresh one's memory of *Superstar*, and one may well be jolted by how good it is. (I was). The Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, lyrics by Tim Rice, gives Pilate a soliloquy that establishes his character: hesitant, puzzled, a victim of circumstance, a man who simply does not understand the events into which he has been thrown. Lloyd Webber's Pilate is a figure facing an existential crisis, mystified by the Galilean, and a tragic figure too, who gets the blame for evermore for failing to handle a situation that he does not grasp.

As McDonough point out in his commentary, 'Pilate's Dream', as this sequence is called, is an anxiety dream, and Pilate sees himself as the victim of injustice rather than its perpetrator. And yet, this Pilate clearly commands our sympathy. He is no thug, no uncaring administrator: he is nuanced, human, trapped, just like the rest of us. This turning of the tables is remarkable. Jesus Christ presents a challenge to all he meets. Some pass, Pilate failed. One begins to see that of all the film versions of the life and death of Christ, *Superstar* holds a commanding position. It is an obvious 70s movie, but at the same time, anchored in that decade, it is timeless too. Unlike so many other versions of Pilate on film, it has not dated badly.

Reading McDonough, two things emerge: we are obsessed with Pilate, and we are pretty obsessed too with the Pax Romana that he represents. Yes, it was a great civilisation, but the cost was horrific. And the same is true of our own civilisation. This book is well illustrated with stills from the films, which serve to jog the memory and make one want to revisit some of these masterpieces, or often, less than masterpieces. But in the end the appeal of Pilate in his many versions lies in the realisation that, like the rest of us, he was human, all too human. Pilate, that middle-ranking blundering administrator, is a sort of Roman Everyman.

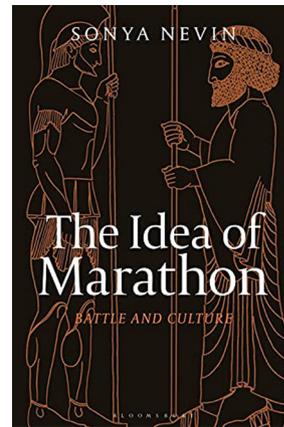
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The Idea of Marathon. Battle and Culture

Nevin (S.) Pp. xii + 236, ills, maps. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. Paper, £22.49 (Cased, £67.50). ISBN: 978-1-350-15759-0

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This is a book about the events of a single day, 'a day of blood and fire', as heralded in the introduction. Yet in a slim volume it covers an extensive timescale, from the sixth century BCE to the present day. There are 12 chapters, each divided into about six sections. The first few chapters introduce the Graeco-Persian world before the Battle of Marathon; then comes the battle and its aftermath. The second half of the book deals with Nevin's chief focus, the idea of the battle, or more specifically the ideals surrounding Marathon, as she

traces its reception and cultural legacy through the ages. The maps and line drawings and vase paintings are helpful additions, though not all of these are easy to read.

It is not, however, an account of the battle, nor is there a full chronology of events. Readers looking for either of these things are likely to be disappointed, and a degree of understanding of the events of 490 would be an essential pre-read. With this in mind, it is not immediately evident who would benefit most from reading this book. It somewhat by-passes the essential details required for OCR's A Level Ancient History, although it is certainly enriching reading for a teacher or a school student looking for extension. It would be an exciting inclusion on a university reading list, but also has an immediacy and accessibility which would appeal to the informed general reader.

Indeed, so immediately readable is the language that it sometimes belies the scholarship of the work. Nevin's style would not look out of place in a work of popular historical fiction. In many respects her writing is reminiscent of one of her key sources, Herodotus. With him she shares a fondness for anecdote, digression, drama and speculation: 'Were [the Athenians' former slaves] more comfortable socialising with each other? Was that even permitted?'. All this makes it an engaging read. Details are described with often dramatic fervour, inviting the reader's imagination and lifting the history off the page. Some readers, however, may find the style disconcertingly intimate, and may struggle, for example, to be told that 'It is time we met the Milesians' new best friends, the Persians'.

Rich insights into the Cimonid family and the Ionian Greeks can be found here, and a useful, concise introduction to Herodotus. Nevin exposes the difficulty of establishing with certainty the events of the battle. She explores the question, unanswered in Herodotus, of whether Persian cavalry fought at Marathon ('so intriguing' she writes), and offers insights from texts as diverse as Cornelius Nepos, and the tenth-century Suda, as well as drawing on later scholarship.