

Historical perspective

The siege of cities in Antiquity

WARNING

VARIOUS TERMS USED IN THIS ARTICLE MIGHT SEEM ANACHRONISTIC, THIS IS THE RESULT OF A DELIBERATE CHOICE FROM THE AUTHORS AIMING AT EASING THE UNDERSTANDING.

BY COLONEL FRÉDÉRIC GUELTON AND LIEUTENANT ANNE-AUORE INQUIMBERT, FROM THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT OF THE FRENCH ARMY



Strategic-historic approach

During all Greek and then Roman antiquity, the “war” phenomenon, in the meaning given to this word by Gaston Bouthoul, has a central place which gives, 2 500 years after Pericles, pertinence and topicality to a thought about poliorcetic⁴ i.e. the art of besieging cities. This reflection contributes to give prominence to the impossibility to separate a global event, the “urban war”, from its general context, the place of cities in antique Greece and Rome, and at the same time to highlight its constants in their dual tactical and symbolic dimension.

The importance of cities as centers of a human community regrouping political, economical and social functions clearly appears in Greece when Athens decides, in the

middle of the Peloponnesian war, to abandon the countryside to save the city. Gradually this political and strategic process is adopted by all Greek cities. De facto, cities become, more than the territory, the object of all covetousness, the objective whose fall marks the political victory in war.

The seizing of the city with the violence incurred during the siege, from surrounding to mercy (or sack) imposes military efforts so far unknown . Succeeding to the traditional “citizen-soldier” that was the hoplite comes a “mercenary-soldier” who accepts more “easily” than his predecessor the exacerbation of violence. War violence to which Rome substitutes, partially, a profusion of technical assets. The Roman “urban war” is characterized by a significant

development of dedicated “logistic” assets, as well as the recourse to earthwork techniques enhanced to a very high degree of perfection.

Two examples of sieges, one Greek and the other Roman illustrate the innovation efforts imposed by the complexity of the seizing of a city.

The siege of the island of Rhodes in 305 B.C.

The siege of the island and that of the city of Rhodes takes place after the Rhodians refuse to obey the Antigonides, supporters of the Macedonian general

Antigonus. Commanded by Demetrios, the Antigonides fleet attacks, during the first phase of the siege, the merchant harbor, which is not included into the fortification lines of the island. If Demetrios is able to land his siege machines on the island, the Rhodians manage to preserve a part of the harbor thus ensuring the continuity of their supplies.

During the year 304, combats mainly take place on the island, but here again the Rhodians manage to drive off the Antigonides and this, despite the material power implemented by Demetrios. Therefore, it is not

thanks to the victory of the besiegers over the besieged that the siege of the island of Rhodes is known for, but by the material and firepower implemented by Demetrios.

From the earthworks necessary for the employment of the *helepoles* carried out by nearly 30,000 workers to the employment of various catapults throwing arrows and cannonballs, with a useful range of nearly 200 meters, all of this gives a fundamental nature to this battle for historians. The *helepole* is the antique siege machine reference. “Fortified” and mobile wooden

tower, it enables the besiegers to move close to the ramparts and then to seize the same ramparts thanks to a footbridge while being protected. The *ram*, which is composed of an “iron covered” beam hanging from a wooden structure, permits to make some breaches through the fortifications. Employed together *rams* and *helepoles* are often terribly efficient.

However, the *helepole* can be reduced to ashes. Thus, the Rhodians from the top of their ramparts set fire to several

helepoles using burning arrows or else create havoc in the ground so as to lead the siege machine to get stuck and, taking advantage of the mess, launch several successful counter-attacks. In fact, the “political-strategic” resolution of the Rhodians (grant of citizenship to slaves who have fought, economic support of the families of citizens killed in action, grant of a military equipment, etc.) as well as an outside support coming from Crete and Knossos have enabled them to beat off the assaults of Demetrios and of the Antigonides despite the material superiority of these last ones.

The siege of Jerusalem by Roman general Titus in 70

In the 1st century B.C., Judaea became willingly the “ally and friend of Rome” ; then, Rome ensured its protection as well as the security of the dynasty in place. However, in 63 B.C., the pacification campaign of the Eastern provinces carried out by Pompey, turned Judaea into a Roman colony. In 6, Judaea is annexed to the Empire. In order to enable Jews to serve in auxiliary troops, a population census is organized in 66. This measure leads to

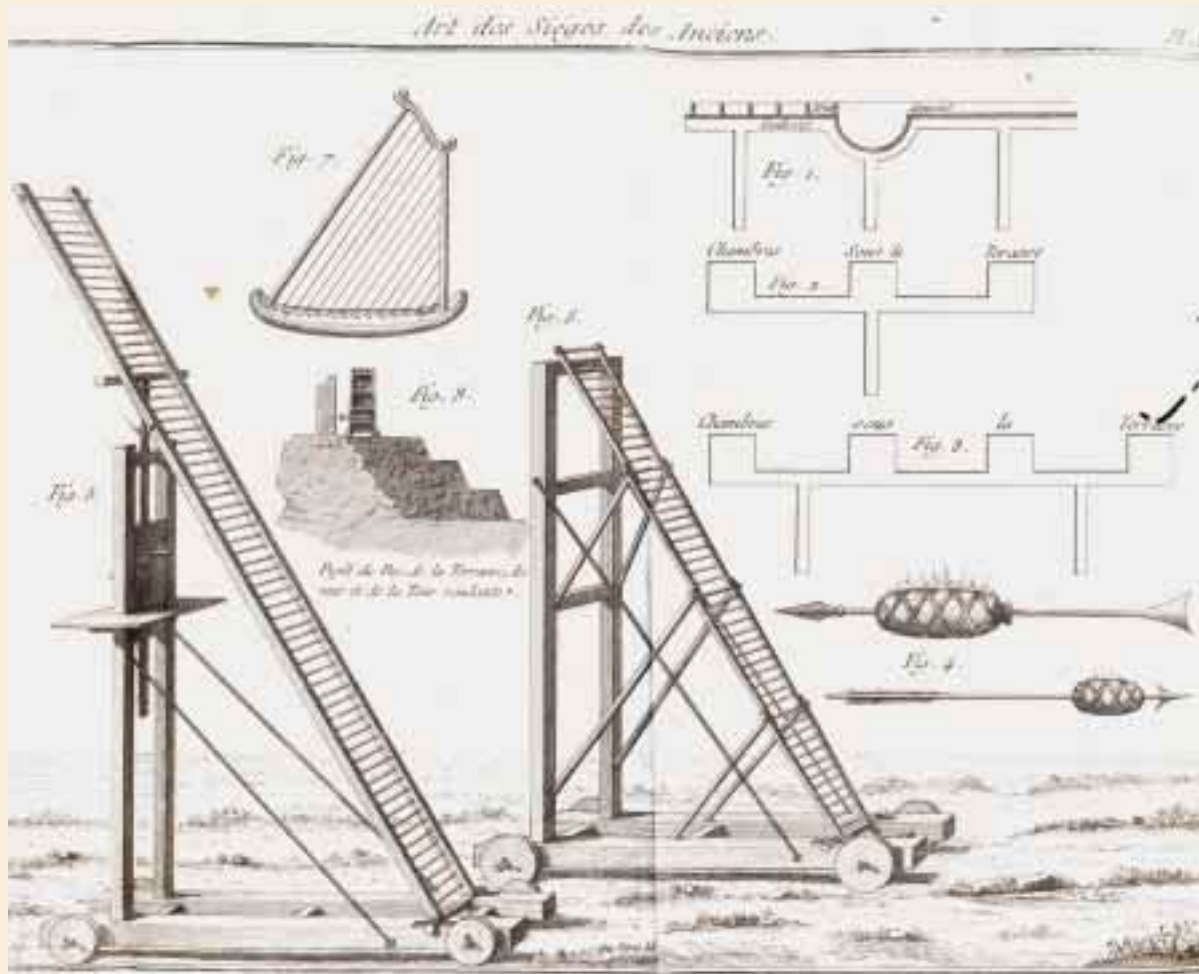


SHAT

the outset of a revolt crushed by general Vespasian's Legions. In 69, Vespasian, acclaimed emperor, returns to Rome and leaves his son Titus to take care of the last Jewish resistance bastion : the city of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, that general Titus watches from Mount Scopus in April 70, is a vast fortress : three rows of ramparts come one after the other and deep ravines deny access to areas not protected by ramparts. After having studied the city during a long time, Titus decides to attack where the first rampart is the lowest. The four legions and the Roman auxiliary troops carry out earthworks in order to be able to employ rams and *helepoles*. The first rampart is taken and then destroyed by the Romans on May 25th.

The second rampart is defeated within 5 days, but Titus gives the order to preserve the city and its Temple. Taking advantage of this pause, the Jews launch a counter-attack and the Romans need an additional 4 days to retake and destroy the second rampart. The siege then enters a "psychological" phase during which general Titus tries to persuade the besieged to surrender. In vain, the Jews reject any



SHAT

compromise and manage to set fire to several helepoles and the four Roman legions which had settled beyond the first rampart are compelled to withdraw. Titus then decides to blockade the city whilst preserving his soldiers. He built a wall aiming at denying any supply to the besieged and simultaneously enabling his troops to carry out further earthworks. This is how a wall of roughly 7 km long is built over 3 days. On the 20th of July, the Jews launch an attack against the construction but the Romans drive them

back and reach the third rampart that they shake hard. Then, feigning a large-scale charge, Titus manages to push back the Jews against the ramparts of the Temple. Besieged and besiegers then fight hand-to-hand. After the failure of a new negotiation, general Titus is compelled to launch his assault against the very Temple he wanted to save.

On the 25th of September 70, Titus orders the decisive assault and, using the rams, destroys the ramparts of the Temple. On the 28th of September 70,

Jerusalem is taken, destroyed and the population, who was not able to fly away is slaughtered. After having celebrated his victory, Titus leaves Jerusalem not forgetting to set up the camp for his Xth legion in what remains of the city in order to secure its "romanity".

*1 Editor's note :
pertaining to the art of
besieging cities.*

In those two examples, the end of the siege marks the end of the war. In both cases, combats show the requirement for both a "logistic" and strategic effort. They also show that the violence of "urban combat" and its resulting symbolic emotional power lead to a radicalization of behaviors that renders the return to quietness, peace and normal life extremely precarious.

Military operation on urban terrain (MOUT) : the pictures



Military power and its applicability (modernity) in the XXI century - p. 4
ADC F. CHESNEAU / SIRPA Terre



Cities are the way leading to peace - p. 13
ADC F. CHESNEAU / SIRPA Terre



The contribution of helicopters to land actions in built-up areas - p. 30
ADJ J.R. DRAHI / SIRPA Terre



Soldiers, cities and war - p. 45
ECPAd



**Lessons still valid ten years later...
Combat operations in Mogadiscio (June 1993) - p. 51**
ECPAd



ADC F. CHESNEAU/SIRPA Terre