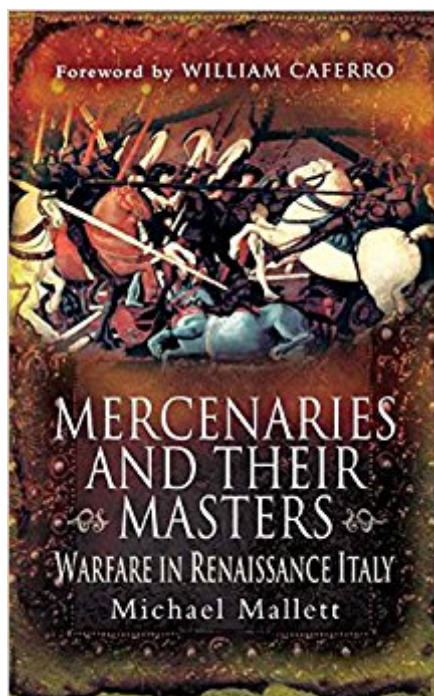


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Mercenaries And Their Masters: Warfare In Renaissance Italy



Synopsis

Michael Mallett's classic study of Renaissance warfare in Italy is as relevant today as it was when it was first published a generation ago. His lucid account of the age of the condottieri - the mercenary captains of fortune - and of the soldiers who fought under them is set in the wider context of the Italian society of the time and of the warring city-states who employed them. A fascinating picture emerges of the mercenaries themselves, of their commanders and their campaigns, but also of the way in which war was organized and practiced in the Renaissance world. The book concentrates on the fifteenth century, a confused period of turbulence and transition when standing armies were formed in Italy and more modern types of military organization took hold across Europe. But it also looks back to the middle ages and the fourteenth century, and forward to the Italian wars of the sixteenth century when foreign armies disputed the European balance of power on Italian soil. Michael Mallett's pioneering study, which embodies much scholarly research into this neglected, often misunderstood subject, is essential reading for any one who is keen to understand the history of warfare in the late medieval period and the Renaissance.

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Customer Reviews

Excellent book and one that is much needed, especially here in the USA where stereotypes about Italians are despicable. This book clearly shows the Italians were excellent soldiers, defenders and specialist. The biggest problem was the intense rivalry that developed to the independence of the Northern Italian city-states in the 12th Century after Milan defeated the Holy Roman German Emperor Frederick Barbarossa along with several defeats against both the Swiss and French as well, Also, the Venetians, the most militant and strongest army and marines in Italy and much respected by all in the Middle Ages. France, Spain and England united close to the form they are today by 1492, whereas Italy was divided with as many as 7 languages being spoken. This is a fascinating read and very interesting with the battles, captains and the rise of the Mercenaries and Italian warfare. A nice change and highly recommended!

Very detailed yet interestingly written.

This is simply the best book about warfare in Renaissance Italy. It is a serious academic study, but trust me, it reads as a good novel. The author opens for us a bright window into the world of condottieri, tyrans and heroes of Renaissance Italy, world of enormous passions, ambitions, lust for power and money, chivalry, violence and war. One of my favourite books on Renaissance warfare!

First published in 1974, this book remains an excellent starting and a major reference on warfare in Renaissance Italy and on mercenaries in the 14th and 15th centuries in the same country. It is the so-called "condottiere" as William Caferro states so aptly in his foreword. Michael Mallett's purpose at the time was to investigate and to disprove a number of commonly-held assumptions regarding these mercenary forces, accused of being at the root of all of Italy's woes and, in particular, of being largely responsible for Italy's inability to withstand French and Spanish conquerors during the first three decades of the 16th century. Contrary to what another reviewer mentions, the book does not start in the middle of the 14th century. Instead, it begins a good century before and shows how changes, including the demise of imperial forces after the death of Frederic II and the move of the papacy to Avignon, changed the political landscape. It also shows that, throughout the whole period, mercenaries in general, and foreign mercenaries in particular, were rarely more than a minority in the armies of the time. Alongside them, at least initially, fought Italian nobles and their retinues with civic militias providing the infantry. The author also shows that the first contingents of foreign mercenaries were Germans and Angevins, well before English, Gascons, Bretons and other

French companies turned up in Italy looking for employment during the second half of the 14th century. He also shows how and why the use of professional soldiers developed, and the advantages that the use of such soldiers represented over local native troops for their employers. Interestingly, and especially for the 14th century, the exactions committed by mercenaries for which they have become so infamous often originated in abuses committed by their employers, in particular their inability to pay them or provide sufficient and good quality food. They also originated from the facts that initial "condottas" were often typically short-term and for a few months only after which the mercenaries, left to their own devices, either had to find another employer and transformed themselves into bandits, living on "protection money", and on the countryside more generally. Potential readers should note that this book is NOT a narrative history of warfare in Italy between 1250 and 1530. It is not either supposed to be a comprehensive history of all mercenaries that served in Italy during this period, whether foreign or Italian, even if it does include a number of fascinating vignettes on some of the most notorious ones, such as John Hawkwood, but also a good number of his 15th century Italian successors. What it is, however, is a comprehensive, although limited, overview of mercenaries, and of how they evolved, responded and fitted in to Italian society, and how warfare in Italy was considerably influenced by them. One of the particularly interesting sections of the book is the one describing how warfare evolved so that by the fifteenth century mercenaries and their Captains were essentially Italians. A related feature shows that these condottiere captains initially came in several types but mostly originated either from noble clans or from wealthy landed "middle classes". A number of them were mercenary princes which had, or acquired, their own bases and lordships such as the Malatestas of Rimini or the Gonzaga of Mantua. In fact, Mallett uncovers a bit of a trend with some among the most successful among the mercenary Captains creating landed aristocratic dynasties over time while still remaining warlords and swords for hire. Another evidenced trend was the gradual move of the five most powerful Italian states (Milan, Venice, Florence, the Papal States and Naples) towards permanent armies made up of mercenary professional (i.e. full time) soldiers which could be rapidly increased during wartime. A third element that the author finally demonstrates in a very convincing way is that Italian warfare and armies were neither "backward" and isolated nor incapable of matching German, Swiss or French opponents. In fact, Mallett provides multiple evidence of the contrary, including an interesting description of the campaign leading to the battle of Fornova where an outnumbered French army barely escaped destruction because the Italian commander's strategy

was rather too complicated to execute. Another battle fought by Venice against the French some fifteen years later exhibited a similar feature. The French won because they were able to take advantage of the composite nature and lack of coordination between the components of the Italian contingents. Five stars for what remains a key reference and a seminal book.

A fantastic book! Well written, concise, and unafraid to say what is 'is' about and what it 'isn't'. Mallet approaches the Renaissance era of Italy and the relationship between the condottieri and their fickle employers. The book starts with a look at the 1361 influx of truly foreign mercenaries and proceeds to tell the tale of how the industry altered over time up until the French invasion of Italy in 1494. Grand and largely foreign Companies which tended to break apart after making enough money slowly, unevenly transformed into smaller, long-term, local companies forming proto-national forces. The shape and size of these companies altered to fit the needs of their employers whose relationship was, at its core, one of a customer and a service-provider. The customer wanted the most quality and highest performance for the lowest price, while the provider wanted to maximize profits and minimize needless risks. Thanks to Mallet's work, this relationship is spelled out. Literally! He was able to cite direct contracts which explain, at least in part, what it was that motivated the mercenaries and their masters. From the issues of pay, winter campaigning, losses of horses and treatment of prisoners, to rewards and bonuses, Mallet covers it all. Italy's city-states were hardly homogeneous in their dealings with mercenaries. While other authors might get lost in the specifics, unable to make any generalities, Mallet does a superb job of following trends, while noting exceptions without falling into the trap of telling no story at all. He does this by city, and by time-period. For example, he notes how a majority of Italian city-states sought long-term contracts with their mercenaries, except for Florence. He noted Venice had better organization than the other cities. He depicted the trend of using heavy cavalry, without forgetting to analyze the role of the infantry. He defined how 'foreign' the mercenaries were, based on the time-period in question, without getting lost in exceptions or unusual side-events. Because of this, Mallet's work is clear and concise and is happy to mention 'exceptions to the rule' without belaboring them. Numbers are always a difficult matter. How large was an army? How many men were in it? How many horses? Mallet approaches this using historical sources that include more than just the exaggerations of chroniclers of era, and balances this out with the actual contracts and common sense. The most opinionated portion of Mallet's book is the approach to certain stereotypes about the condottieri. Right away, Mallet noted that contemporaries were the ones to create many of the generalities

about mercenaries in Italy, and that most of them hold some element of truth. He approaches the concept of mercenaries unwilling to fight, the failure of cavalry in the face of infantry, the lack of a militia and many more of what are largely Machiavelli's complaints. Mannet opposes this with his own analysis, citing examples to prove his points one by one. His conclusion is different to that of Machiavelli in the end, even though he noted some of the politician's concerns were relevant. Overall, the book makes for a quick read, offering an understandable and surprisingly clear view of the otherwise hopelessly complex Italian peninsula of the Renaissance, filled with anecdotes, facts presented as a readable story.

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