

Arming Slaves: From Classical Times to the Modern Age. Edited by CHRISTOPHER LESLIE BROWN and PHILIP D. MORGAN. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2006. 384 pages. \$38.00 (paper).

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Based on a conference convened at Yale University's Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition in 2000, *Arming Slaves* sets itself the ambitious task of examining political and military elites' arming of slaves in Europe, Africa, and the Americas from the fifth century BCE to the nineteenth century. Two things illustrate its intent: nine of the thirteen chapters have either "arming" or "armed" in their titles, and, on page 333, coeditor Christopher Leslie Brown posits an analytic distinction between elites arming slaves (this collection) and slaves arming themselves (not this collection). The chapters' evidence ranges from sparse sources for slave soldiers in antiquity to better-documented experiences of slave soldiers during the American Civil War. Many of the chapters, however, face what Peter Hunt refers to as "pitiful" (16) sources of information about slave warfare. The chapters on nineteenth-century slave soldiers in southern Africa and Spanish Cuba employ oral sources. There are five maps and no illustrations except that of a private from the Fifth West India Regiment adorning the cover.

As one might expect from such a project, the scope of the research questions is vast. Three are central to this volume. First, if the history of slave resistance suggests that slaves were rarely contented with their condition and could prove dangerous when armed, why would elites decide to arm them? The collection provides at least four different answers. First, some elites decided not to arm slaves. This was the case in Brazil and especially with southern slaveholders during their wars for independence from Great Britain in the 1770s and the United States in the 1860s. Second, arming slaves was "uncontroversial" (28) in societies with such traditions. The Athenian navy regularly used slave crewmen, while *mamlūks* (military slaves) were institutionalized during the Islamic caliphate. Third, some societies had a sporadic tendency to arm slaves that served as a precedent but not as a tradition, especially in the eighteenth-century British and French Caribbean. The volume's fourth and most important explanation for arming slaves was necessity. Need, Jane Landers informs us, "explains Spain's centuries-long military deployment of slaves in the circum-Caribbean" (136). Hendrik Kraay argues that "military necessity" (159) forced regional rebels opposed to the new Brazilian imperial regime to arm slaves.

The second major question is, what was it like to be a slave armed by the state? One of the revelations of this volume is the sheer diversity of that experience. Some soldiers were well armed, others poorly armed. Some slaves served as sailors, ranging from male rowers on Athenian triremes to seamen on French republican corsairs and vessels of the U.S. Navy. When they did not fight, slaves served as laborers, cooks, washers, trench diggers, stretcher bearers, sex workers, etc. Some slaves gained their freedom through fighting; others were denied it. Some slaves paid the ultimate price: hundreds of slave soldiers died during the siege of Havana in 1762, while black soldiers were often the victims of massacre in 1791 Saint Domingue, 1844 Brazil, and the 1864 United States. Veterans retained proud memories of their military exploits, including former soldiers from the Haitian Revolution, the U.S. Civil War, and the first Cuban independence struggle. Important issues that deserve fuller treatment are the significance of slaves coming together as large armed groups for the first time as well as their complicated encounters with free blacks and other armed personnel. The role of African veterans in slave societies is mentioned but also deserves fuller investigation.

Third, what impact did arming slaves have on the institution of slavery? The collection provides several answers. It had a limited effect on those societies that traditionally armed slaves. Indeed, societies with military slavery have the least to tell us about slave relations precisely because social relations of domination and subordination were more diffuse than in the New World. Furthermore it does not appear to have had much of an impact on slavery in independent Brazil and the new United States, although this was no doubt due to the elites' decision not to arm slaves. On the other hand, many of these chapters and much of the recent historical literature on slavery, abolition, and wars of independence in the Americas make it difficult to deny that slave soldiers played a vital role in either the short-term (Haiti, Peru, United States, Cuba) or the long-term (Spanish America) destruction of New World slavery. The key question here, of course, is whether this outcome was the consequence of arming slaves or slaves arming. Finally, slave soldiers opened up avenues to citizenship in the French Caribbean and the postbellum United States, although this collection suggests the ephemerality of that citizenship, while it would be anachronistic to equate the social role of the *mamlūks* in the Islamic world with modern notions of citizenship.

Does the collection succeed in meeting its objectives? One of these is identified as illuminating "relatively unexplored territory" (2). However, many of these contributors have already published on arming slaves. It would be more accurate to say that more research has been done on some areas (United States, Spanish Cuba) than on others (ancient Egypt,

Islamic world, precolonial Africa). Another aim stated on the back cover—"to facilitate cross-cultural comparisons"—is addressed by Laurent Dubois and Ada Ferrer but rarely pursued elsewhere. Indeed, what do we learn by comparing *mamlūks* who evolved into a centuries-long military and social elite with black U.S. soldiers mobilized in 1863 and disbanded by late 1866? This raises questions about the facility of comparative work from specialized studies as well as its dissemination beyond the academy.

In addition, Brown's analytic distinction between arming slaves and slaves arming is not persuasive. The chapters by Landers and David Geggus argue that European colonial powers armed the slaves during the Haitian Revolution, yet much of the historical literature suggests that the colonists were playing catch-up with the massive ex-slave army. As Dubois reminds us, in 1793 French commissioner Léger Félicité Sonthonax "faced an imposing military force of slave insurgents who, since the mass uprising of August 1791," had "effectively smash[ed] plantation slavery in much of the region" (238). Moreover, the Haitian Revolution, whether as specter to political elites or as beacon for the enslaved in the Americas, betokened slaves arming, not elites arming slaves. The ideological consequence was about slave actions, not those of political elites who found it necessary to arm the slaves. Finally, several of the chapters and the index entry on "runaway slaves" (365) hint at those slaves who self-emancipated before the state decided either to arm them or to abolish slavery. It was the "actions of the slaves themselves, flocking to British lines," write Philip D. Morgan and Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy of the American Revolution, that "kept the pressure on the British commanders" (191). This "barefoot plebiscite" (slaves voting with their feet) during moments of social upheaval blurs the line between slave resistance and military exigency.

This readable collection expands our understanding of soldiering as a different type of slave work, the contradictions faced by elites within slave societies, and the wide array of outcomes resulting from arming slaves. But it has its limitations. The lack of historical evidence produced by slaves themselves means their relative silence compared with endless self-reflecting tomes of political elites. Thus the really important question of why slaves would fight for elites is more often implied than documented. Finally, does not the historical study of arming slaves offer the familiar history of things done to slaves, rather than slaves as historical actors? What are the implications of this sort of top-down historical interpretation for schoolchildren and the wider public, many of whom the Gilder Lehrman Center seeks to educate on issues of race, slavery, and abolition?