The Art of War (Part 1: Ancient Times)

Among the “five essentials for victory” Sun Tzu lists: “he will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.” This maxim belongs to the Chinese military treatise on The Art of War from around the fifth century BCE, one of the most influential texts of all times dealing with war, strategy, and tactics. About half a millennium later, in a different corner of the world altogether, Julius Caesar will offer his own lesson in the art of the moment: Usually, rain was deemed unfavorable to an attack; but when a downpour during a siege caused his Gallic enemy to slacken off, he spotted an opportunity, pretended to ease off, then struck and seized the Gallic town. With the right touch, it seems, contretemps may be turned into victory. Some one-hundred-fifty years later yet again, the senator and general Julius Frontinus put together four books on Stratagems, including sections on timing, how to correct a mistake, when to flee. They include episodes like Caesar’s for future (Roman) generals to study, so that they too can spot or create an opportunity or turn defeat into victory: as when Titus Marcius decided to attack the Carthaginians when they were (over)confident in victory, taking two of their camps in the course of one night; like the Gauls, the Carthaginians did not see it coming.

In the course of ten weeks, we will read the Art of War, the Gallic War, the Stratagems (and, time permitting, excerpts from Polybius and Onasander’s The General) both within their respective (Chinese, Greco-Roman) contexts and with a comparative interest: how to motivate your troops, how to deceive the other side, when and how to let them escape, et alia. This course will be continued in the Winter with readings of Machiavelli, von Clausewitz, and Keegan.

Schedule (Capitalized readings will be made available as pdfs; online readings are linked. I may post additional readings in the course of the term.)

1 09/22 The Art of War? Overview of the Course and Sun Tzu’s classical treatise.  
Please Read: Sun Tzu, Introduction + Chapters 1-7

2 09/29 Conceptualizing War. 
Please Read: Sun Tzu, Remainder. If you have time: Sawyer, ‘Historical Background’ (in sel.).

3 10/06 Science in Action: Greek Thoughts on Leadership. Polybius on the Talents of the General and the Requirements of History.  
Please Read: Polybius, IX.12-26.1 If you have time: Walbank, ‘Pragmatike Historie’.

4 10/13 Polybius’ Consummate General in Action: Julius Caesar.  
Please Read: Caesar, Gallic War 5.2

Cla 134: The Art of War
Christopher B. Krebs

Preliminary Course Syllabus

5  10/20  Achilles or Odysseus? Caesar and the Romans’ conflicting attitudes towards courage and strategy.
       Please Read: Caesar, Gallic War 7. If you have time: Lendon, ‘The Rhetoric of Combat.’

6  10/27  So that future Generals may learn: Frontinus’ Stratagems.
       Please Read: Frontinus, Stratagems, 1-2. If you have time: Oxford Classical Dictionary, s.v. Frontinus.

7  11/03  Frontinus read by Sun Tzu.
       Please Read: Frontinus, Stratagems, 3-4.

8  11/10  A Philosopher’s Take on War: Onasander.
       Please Read: Onasander, Strategikos, 1-26.

9  11/17  Ethics of Leadership?
       Please Read: Onasander, Strategikos, 27-52.

10 12/01  Final discussion.
       Please Read: Campbell, ‘Teach yourself how to be a general’.

Bibliography (required)
Sun Tzu, Art of War. Translated by Gary Gagliardi. ISBN 978-1929194902
OR
Frontinus, Stratagems. ISBN 978-0674991927
Aeneas Tacticus, Asclepiodotus, Onasander ISBN 978-1519732163

3 https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Frontinus/Strategemata/home.html
4 https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/e/roman/texts/onasander/home.html