
Reviewed by Joseph Frechette

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This substantial two-part volume in Brill’s annual Late Antique Archaeology series combines eight bibliographic essays with a collection of twenty thematic articles, the majority of which had their genesis at a 2007 Oxford conference. The first part will be undeniably useful as a starting point for those interested in the intersection of military history and archaeology in the late Roman and early Byzantine periods and trying to make sense of the mass of recent specialized secondary literature, while the second, as with all scholarly anthologies, contains articles that will be of more or less interest depending on readers’ specific agendas.

The editors are blunt in their advocacy of the importance of military history, going so far as to open their foreword with the rather ambitious statement that “war and warfare created the world of Late Antiquity” (p. xvii). One may be sympathetic to this point of view, but still reasonably ask, if we accord pride of place to war as “father of all” in late antiquity, whether this was any more true here than at any other time and place in human history, and whether any other phenomena, such as religious change, might have at least a share in the making of late antiquity.

Sarantis reemphasizes this point in the first chapter, a general essay entitled “Waging War in Late Antiquity,” lamenting both that military history is not as central to the research agendas of academic departments as it perhaps should be, and that the enormous flowering of late Roman military scholarship that has occurred over the last few decades has lacked a holistic approach. There is a dual irony here. The first is the trumpeting of the importance of military history over other thematic interests on the one hand, and calling for greater scholarly integration on the other. The second is the complaint that the field has not received its scholarly due in a volume containing nearly three hundred pages of bibliographic essays. If much remains to be done in an absolute sense, we should not ignore the fact that the field of late antique military history is vital enough to have produced a truly astounding array of good
scholarship, much of which is on display in this very work.

This first chapter stands a bit apart, serving as a sort of general introduction preceding the bibliographic essays in part 1, while the remainder of the extended articles are bound separately in part 2. It is an interesting piece in which Sarantis argues that the late Roman way of war relied to an extraordinary degree upon a network of fortifications large and small crisscrossing the landscape. Sarantis sees the military infrastructure of late antiquity as the Romans’ key advantage, providing not just defensive systems against external threats, but also platforms for offensive action, as well as mechanisms for the control of local populations and resources. In this he argues against a binary conception of Roman strategy as either offensive or defensive, showing it to have been one that was flexible depending upon the specific conditions of particular times and places. Fortified cities, bases, and watchtowers would have facilitated intelligence gathering, the supplying of troops in the field, and the maintenance of both civilian and military morale while denying these assets to enemies. He then goes on to outline the general characteristics of sieges and field battles with reference to these fortifications, arguing, in essence, that they were one way in which the Romans “shaped the battlefield” to their advantage. Thus, the key military consequence of the political weakness of the western empire was its inability to hold and maintain its network of defended bases while the loosening of the eastern empire’s hold on its eastern and Balkan fortifications contributed to the disasters of the late sixth and seventh centuries. Whether this correlation with a decline in military success should necessarily be seen as causation or part of an interactive process, it undoubtedly compounded the Romans’ operational problems.

If the advantages of this network of fortifications are undeniable, one might quibble with Sarantis’s assertion that fortification was the “key military innovation” in late antiquity (pp. 3-4) or that this was an era “in which siege warfare assumed an importance not witnessed since the Classical Greek era” (p. 55). After all, dramatic and lengthy sieges were hardly unknown in the Hellenistic and early imperial periods, and the four-century period under consideration did see a number of other military innovations, not least in organization, tactics, and command structure. That said, Sarantis deserves credit for pointing out some of critical implications of the fortified landscape.

Of the bibliographic essays that comprise the remainder of part 1, the first, by Conor Whately, is a general bibliographic guide to current secondary literature, editions of ancient sources, and material evidence. Four essays, two by Sarantis on military equipment and tactics and two by Whately on organization and life, and strategy, diplomacy, and frontiers serve as guides to the scholarship in these various areas. The final three bibliographic essays by Sarantis and Neil Christie discuss the literature on the fortifications of the west, Africa, and the east. These essays generally do a good job of laying out the various historiographic debates within their various scopes. That said, their utility is somewhat hindered by an odd arrangement of their bibliographies that makes tracking down references from the narrative essays more difficult than necessary. The in-text references simply cite works by author and date of publication, but the bibliographies are subdivided thematically and it is sometimes not obvious which section the researcher should consult, a difficulty compounded by the fact that the bibliographies are not arranged alphabetically, but in reverse chronological order, and lack line-breaks between works. Once one is comfortable with these idiosyncrasies, they are not such a problem, but a more user-friendly arrangement, as is the case with Sarantis’s first chapter and all of the articles in part 2, would have been helpful to the
novices to the field who will hopefully be consulting these essays.

The articles in part 2 open with a piece by John Haldon on Byzantine defensive strategy and information-gathering from the seventh through the eleventh centuries. As such it is something of a chronological outlier for this collection. It would be a pity for students of middle Byzantium to overlook it because of its inclusion in a volume on late antiquity since it discusses the implications of the deteriorating road network and fortifications, particularly small frontier forts (phrouria), for operations and intelligence as well as the types of information and misinformation the Byzantines regarded as essential to collect or to be on guard against.

James Crow provides a survey of east Roman fortifications, including the massive urban defenses of great cities such as Antioch, the frontier zones of Mesopotamia and the Balkans, and large-scale barrier walls such as the Anastasian Wall in Thrace, a possible identification of the Haemus Gates in the eastern Balkan Mountains, and a fifty-eight-kilometer-long wall in the Abhazian Caucasus of either Roman or Sassanian construction. He is surely right to emphasize the ubiquity of fortifications in late antiquity and their complexity. His critique of Procopius's Buildings as being akin to the product of a “spin-doctor” is an argument few would gainsay, but Crow adroitly notes that their rhetoric of grand strategic security for the Constantinopolitan audience is coupled with a pragmatic message of refuge for inhabitants of the frontier zones during invasion.

Michael Whitby's contribution is a survey of siege tactics from the third through the seventh centuries. This is the first of a few articles within this nominally archaeological collection that point to the limitations of the material record and appeal to literary evidence because the mechanics of sieges, with a few notable exceptions, have not left traces that can be confidently associated with particular events. He provides a good discussion not only of offensive and defensive techniques, but also of different groups' capacity for siege warfare and the development of engines, with particular focus on the traction trebuchet, arguing that the Avars brought it to the Mediterranean against an independent Roman invention.

The chapters of J. C. N. Coulston, Michel Kazanski, and John Conyard all focus on various aspects of personal military equipment. Coulston discusses the Roman perspective, emphasizing that cultural inclusivity had always been a feature of Roman equipment, and that its later manifestations should not be dismissed as a symptom of “barbarization” (p. 482).

By contrast, Kazanski, in his broad sketch of the equipment of Rome's Germanic, steppe, and Slavic enemies, is comfortable describing western Roman armies as essentially identical in arms and tactics to their Germanic enemies, and groups' tactics as readily identifiable based on material finds. While one cannot dispute his familiarity with the archaeological evidence, some of Kazanski's larger historical conclusions might be debated. Two points are particularly striking. First, in contrast to Coulston, and to Elton's later chapter, he is comfortable describing the western Roman army as essentially Germanic and “barbarian” (p. 504). Second, his argument that the Slavs' facility with guerilla warfare was the key element in their conquest of the Balkans in the late sixth and early seventh centuries makes no mention of the utter collapse of the east Roman military establishment at the time due to factors entirely unrelated to the Slavs, such as the successive coups of Phokas and Heraclius and the final and existential war being waged with the Sassanians.

Conyard's essay is a fascinating, if admittedly sometimes speculative, discussion of his attempts to reproduce and test out the various elements of Roman soldiers' kit, taking the reader through most elements of equipment and some of the practical issues of its employment. Like Coulston, he acknowledges that almost every element of Ro-
man equipment had a non-Roman origin, but denies that this was any truer in late antiquity than earlier.

The contributions of Ian Colvin, Christopher Lillington-Martin, and Susannah Belcher are grouped under the heading “Literary Sources and Topography.” Colvin argues that both Procopius and Agathias were less dependent on oral sources than is often supposed and relied instead upon certain classes of official documents. This is an attractive suggestion based on Colvin’s analysis of the types of information contained in the two historians’ narratives, which, when stripped of “literary chaff” leave us with accounts of heroic deeds, weaker operational details, and good accounts of political, diplomatic, and strategic details. Colvin suggests that this was due to a reliance on higher-level correspondence and reports and citations for good conduct, while oral informants would surely have included greater operational, particularly topographic, detail. If there is a weakness in this analysis, it is the assumption that oral sources would or would not have included any particular class of information, or that the historians would have made use of it were it provided.

Lillington-Martin reexamines the operational events at Dara in AD 530 and Rome in AD 537-38, reconciling Procopius’s accounts with a detailed appreciation of geography. He makes a good case for Procopius’s accuracy, noting that a sensitive reading, combined with attention to geographic detail, permits the placing of the engagement at Dara two to three kilometers south of the city rather than right outside the gates, and the actions at the opening and close of Wittigis’s siege of Rome along the Via Salaria rather than the Via Flaminia.

Belcher’s piece deals with Ammianus Marcellinus’s presentation of the handover of Nisibis to the Persians in AD 363. Contrary to Colvin and Lillington-Martin’s relatively optimistic appraisal of Procopius, Belcher suggests that Ammianus’s narrative is a literary tableau that “cannot be eas-ily or unwarily mined for historical fact” (p. 635), and focuses on his presentation of the surrender of the town as a failure of Iustitia and the Roman state under Jovian. Thus the actual grief of the displaced citizens needs to be distinguished from the grief as constructed by Ammianus. It is an interesting discussion, but one’s reaction to this piece will very much depend on how one regards the literary turn in history and the degree to which these traumatic events may have been distorted by the historian. In the end Belcher still concedes that “Ammianus does not wholly exaggerate the shock of the treaty of A.D. 363, which was indeed immense” (p. 649).

Articles by Hugh Elton, Michael Kulikowski, and Iulia Libica, Oriol Olesi, Jordi Guàrdia, Marta Maragall, Oriol Mercadal, Jordi Galbany, and Jordi Nadal appear under the heading “The West.” Elton surveys the archaeological evidence for western imperial campaigns for the period AD 284-423 after a handy sketch of the major features of the fourth-century Roman army. Contrary to Kazanski, Elton reiterates his position disputing the extent and seriousness of “barbarization” in the western army (p. 659).[1] In turning to the archaeological evidence, Elton is clear about its limitations, especially when used in isolation from literary and documentary sources and in attempting to deal with events in particular brief periods as opposed to longer processes.

Kulikowski’s “The Archaeology and War and the 5th C. ‘Invasions’” is a useful tonic that forces readers to consider some fundamental issues, including whether or not the fifth century was actually characterized by a greater level of violence and invasion, and to what degree literary and archaeological evidence can or should be linked. Given that most of the wars of the period were fought by armies resident on imperial soil for at least a generation, Kulikowski sees them more as civil wars than invasions, with various factions including a greater or lesser leavening of foreigners. Those of us sympathetic to the notion of ex-
ogenous shock as popularized by Peter Heather will have much to think about.[2] Like Elton, Kulikowski is circumspect about the utility of archaeology to do more than provide a context for the historical narrative, which must still come from the literary sources, a point he emphasizes with reference to various case studies, noting that we should be wary of connecting evidence of social change in the material record with violent barbarians and the Roman response.

The paper of Olesi et al. presents the interesting find of a fifth- or sixth-century Barbary macaque’s burial on the site of Julia Libica in the eastern Pyrenees. Based on a handful of items included in the burial (a Merovingian style belt buckle as well as four bronze plates and an iron pin typical of Roman military belts), the relative absence of civilian urban life in contemporary Julia Libica, and a parallel find of a macaque in a military necropolis in the Moselle, the authors are confident in assigning the find a military context. In contrast to the caution of Elton and Kulikowski, they would connect it to a temporary and otherwise undocumented Roman military presence in the region through a mixture of balance of power diplomacy and the regular deployment of large armies supported by the fortified infrastructure he discussed in the first chapter.

Two pieces, by James Howard-Johnston and Conor Whately, cover aspects of the eastern frontier. Howard-Johnston provides a broad synthesis of the east Roman fortification systems through the sixth century informed by a broad knowledge of eastern topography based on his own and others’ observations. Readers will profit from his discussion not only of the fortifications and road networks themselves, but also of the need for secure assembly areas and logistical hubs which enabled both offensive and defensive movements through difficult terrain.

By contrast, Whately focuses on a single site, the fortress of el-Lejjūn on the Arabian frontier. He takes issue with some of the conclusions presented by the excavators, specifically that the garrison at the site dwindled in the sixth century and abandoned it following an earthquake in AD 551. Instead, he argues for a continued occupation by limitanei who relied on local supply rather than centralized logistical support.

The final two papers, by Christie and Maria Kouroumali, are grouped under the heading “Civil War.” Christie’s piece on archaeology and civil war would make a good companion for Kulikowski’s, noting that “how we define civil war is matched by how we define the power groups and
their relationships with the central state” (p. 930). He attempts to tease out how materially visible the trauma of intestine discord might be, noting reasonably that we should be wary of assuming fortifications were inspired by non-Roman threats and that memorials and numismatics were as often inspired by civil conflict as foreign war.

Kouroumali examines the response of the local Italians to Justinian’s reconquest of Italy. Her conclusion that the Italians were caught between the Ostrogoths and the Romans with no strong ideological preference for either side other than the immediate need to maintain their own security is persuasive. Both those who view Gothic identity as entirely fluid[4] and those who see Theoderic’s kingdom as a successful restoration of the western empire,[5] must reckon with the fact that the Italians and the Goths apparently saw a distinction between themselves and it was profound enough that the Goths were comfortable retaliating in horrific ways for perceived disloyalty.

Overall, the editors and contributors should be proud of this compilation, which illustrates the enormous mass of current scholarship. Everyone will not agree with all of the contributors’ conclusions, but they do not all necessarily agree with one another. Surely this is a symptom of the ferment in the field and the need for bibliographic guides such as those in in part 1. It is unfortunate that the work’s price will likely be a barrier to students’ access to part 1 as an overall general guide except at the select institutions that see fit to acquire it, or for those few undergraduates with the foresight and time to request general reference volumes through interlibrary loan.[6]

Notes


[6]. A WorldCat search reveals only a bit more than 100 institutions worldwide which, alas, do not include that of this reviewer.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

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