Walter E. KAEGI, The University of Chicago Reassessing Late Antique Warfare

"Warfare was the single biggest preoccupation of historians in antiquity" is the judgment expressed on the initial publicity page of *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare*, in 2007. Late antique warfare has many theoretical dimensions but it also can attract undergraduate enrollments and serve for outreach to a broader public in normal as well as extension courses if institutions will open up such courses and hire fit instructors. There is a documented dearth of military history course offerings throughout North America irrespective of periods of history, a situation that has existed for a long time. I noted it in the late 1970s and the condition has persisted. However a glance at shelf space in bookstores and on the web and the History Channel underscores widespread actual and potential public interest. But one must ask whether the public's interest can possibly mesh with those of academics. Within universities and institutes there is new interest in military history after decades of disinterest and neglect. The explanation is multi-faceted, but notable is rising academic atttention, especially among historians, to empires and their past use and misuse of imperial political and military power. The conceptual challenge here: understanding political and military power, their projection and attenuation. I would prefer a conservative definition of power presented in the classic text by the late Hans J. Morgenthau and Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1985) p. 32, "When we speak of power, we mean man's control over the minds and actions of other men. By political power we refer to the mutual relations of control among holders of political authority and between the latter and the people at large. Political power is a psychological relation between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised." How that translates into better or poorer late antique military history is a different matter. Positive new elements include the creation of technical tools that improve precision and facilitate comprehension and new perspectives and tests for cross-checking military history. There are great opportunities for making better use of visual methodologies: such as satellite imaging, digital elevation modeling [DEM] (including LiDAR [Light Detection and Ranging]) – which helps to uncover old

difficult to detect military fortifications and other sites below dense vegetation -- for micro-topographic, innovative landscape studies and other forms of computer modeling provide opportunities for new investigations of logistics, campaigns, sieges, tactics, and frontier zones. Archaeologists have utilized these but they have special applications for military studies. One must take climate, including weather, hydrological and soil conditions into account. Regrettably many students have a woeful understanding of geography and its fundamental relationship to military history. But new tools exist to help them.

We must synthesize disparate but micro-level archaeological data for its relevance to military questions and conditions. Better photography and cartography can illuminate aspects of military practices and decisions. We now have knowledge of more frontier posts than our predecessors did: for example relatively recent achievements have been the positive identifications of hitherto unknown or misidentified sites such as Kastron Mefaa (Umm al-Rasas, Jordan) and Cululis (Jullula, Tunisia), and Bezabde (Phaenicha, in eastern Turkey). Outstanding Late Antique fortifications such as Lugo (NW Spain, Gallicia), Hisar in Bulgaria can stimulate classroom discussion, as can late antique re-use of venerable Roman military sites such as Timgad and Leptis Magna. Various fortified points on the eastern frontier, most notably Dara, or Melitene along the Euphrates, or Cephe (Hasnkayf, Hisn Qayf), Bezabde and Amida on the Tigris, can aid discussion and comprehension. Roads and routes need much more investigation, for example, the strategically and logistically vital Via Egnatia in the Balkans. The only problem is the instructor's need to find the time to assemble the plates on these subjects.

Changing situations within modern scholarship, technology, and theory create opportunities but also perils and pitfalls. Among them: it is easy to exaggerate or imagine or see a connection to a military event or context for certain kinds of archaeological evidence. It is difficult for many to conceptualize military reasoning in steady-state conditions and even more so to conceive of military reasoning under external or internal pressures. Other risks and challenges exist, for example, in using comparative military history, yet we know certain strategic choke points and venues experienced repeated military challenges.

It is easy but risky to use out of date generalizations and judgments. No one would knowingly do that, of course. We need to understand the complexity of interpreting evidence both literary and archaeological for military purposes while avoiding boring or turning away potential audiences.

Responsible handling of military history is essential. One must resist the temptation to descend the slippery slope to disseminate contemporary political agendas and commentary. There is and has been for a long time a dearth of trained military historians available to teach and train others in late antique military history. We however cannot return to drums and trumpets. Although warfare can be taught in isolation it is best understood and taught in historical context, and that context might well involve extensive probing of social, cultural, religious, and economic dimensions. Decades ago the study of institutions dominated history including military history while today students can gain a reasonable institutional overview from relevant chapters of volumes XII-XIV of the new *Cambridge Ancient History*. Ethnic and frontier studies have qualified and sharpened analysis, as have studies on the limitations inherent in the structures, models, and assumptions of literary sources whether Greek or Latin. Here I pass over publications that fall into the distinctive but related categories of war and society or war and peace studies. Constraints of time make it possible to mention only a limited number of topics that include battle, strategy, tactics, operations, and logistics. I must be selective.

Especially difficult for contemporary North American college and university students to understand are military discipline, patience, tedium, conduct of sieges, experiences of the besieged, weather, and the need for central authority to concede discretion in decision-making to commanders on the spot given difficulties with communications from remote central administrative points. One cannot overemphasize the challenges of communications in late antiquity for commanders, imperial advisers, and for bureaucrats. Likewise it is hard for students to appreciate judgmental challenges in military operations before the invention and dissemination of the field telescope in the early modern era and subsequent improvements in vision and perspectives from aviation and satellites. The tempo of warfare differed in

that era. For several decades there has been a crisis in military historiography that extends beyond ancient history. Events and the historically contingent, as well as historiographical issues, such as narrative and memory and ethnic stereotyping and the rhetoric of war, deserve attention. The interrelationship of ethnic stereotyping with tactical and operational effectiveness needs more study. Old yet important problems persist: definitions of strategy, the uncertainty of numbers, and the relevance of war to continuing and changing debates on decline and fall. Desiderata include more work on decision-making—we need much more investigation of aspects of this, calculations, and planning at the emperor's level, including budgetary constraints, internal security fears, and bureaucratic controls. Many questions remain concerning restraint in and commitment to waging offensive war. Battle cannot be consigned to oblivion but it was rare because of risks in a world of finite and diminishing human and financial resources. Manpower was precious.

Another impediment exists. We know much less in our motorized age than earlier generations of late antique historians about handling animals and the limits of horses, pack animals, and camels. In pursuit of the recovery of that information it is worthwhile for historians and students to reexamine nineteenth-century military practices and training experiences, including those of the colonial eras (such as practices and training of French officers for service in North Africa), with horses, techniques in military Academies and training manuals of the nineteenth century for rough estimating the calculation of distances and speed of approaching or retreating foes whether on foot or mounted. This task may even prove interesting to some students. Yet nineteenth-century conditions and techniques were not necessarily those of the third through seventh centuries.

Papyrological studies provide especially valuable insights for Egypt but their input is not limited to military conditions and events in Egypt. Recent examples: papyri from Vienna are now providing new insights into mid-seventh-century conditions as Muslims occupied and consolidated their occupation in Egypt, most specifically ca. 644 CE at Hermopolis. Also, papyrological research contributes to our

understanding of logistics: speed of travel (e.g., new studies on Egypt, especially Adams, C. E. P. (Colin E. P.), *Land transport in Roman Egypt: a study of Economics and Administration in a Roman Province* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Why study seemingly static military hierarchies and lists? These contain information that can seem boring and mystifying to students. How did such hierarchies actually work and can we know that? The *Notitia Dignitatum*, now available on the web, can help students to visualize some topics and appreciate other problems of conceptualization and interpretation. However sifting other kinds of information about military units is desirable. We need more research into troops in motion whether or not we look at lists and charts. Military movements deserve more investigation. I do not simply restrict this to actual military expeditionary campaigning and operations. We need more study in research and classrooms of several kinds of shifts: successful and unsuccessful efforts at military adaptation and improvisation, difficulties with communications, and difficulties of shifting troops between different regions of the empire, whether on land or by water. Related to this it is worthwhile to evaluate whether military experience acquired on one front had utility for those units being transferred to another region. We especially need more studies of adaptation and poor adjustment to moving troops from eastern to western parts of the empire and vice-versa. Transfer of troops across the straits and other bodies of water needs more attention, as do transfers of troops between the east and west and vice-versa. Historians should study the logistics of eastern campaigning much more carefully, especially for the regions of Antioch and territories between Antioch and Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

Historians must understand and discount or allow for skewness or distortion arising from military historiography's frequent interrelationship with contemporary opinions and events, hence material on late antiquity written during and after World War I, World War II, or under the impact of colonial and anti-colonial conflicts, requires a critical evaluation. A subsection of issues arise from past use and abuse of various late antique military concepts and precedents are sobering, for example, Nazi (including

Himmler's) invocation of the term soldier-farmers as a model for creating new military institutions in the Third Reich. Contemporary controversy includes debate about the alleged issue of the negative even, according to some, asphyxiating influence of the *Annales* School on the study and writing of military history. An autobiographical note: the composition and publication of my own essay on "The Crisis of Military Historiography" in 1981 in fact resulted from frustration and outcry when I noted, during a sabbatical in France during academic year 1978-1979, the lack of coverage of military history in the then stylish new historiographical encyclopedia and manifesto *La Nouvelle Histoire* (Paris 1979). I originally composed and read that paper in French in Toulouse and then revised, translated, and adapted it for publication in the USA with the encouragement of the then dean of US military sociologists, the late Morris Janowitz. Some of those issues of 1978-79 endure today.

Insufficiently known are military ambitions of leaders and their advisers. That issue of ambition has been more central to classical Greek and Republican history. Related but identical are many different problems of military decision-making. Decision-making involves commanders and ultimately the emperor and his advisers. Numerous appraisals exist for the leadership and decision-making of such eminent figures as Constantine I and Julian. The related issue of emperors campaigning in person or failure to do so needs more study, especially after the death of Theodosius I. A model monograph on strategic and tactical decision-making is Noel Lenski's regnal study of Valens*: Failure of Empire: Valens and the Roman State in the Fourth Century A.D*. More work is necessary on Theodosius I and Theodosius II, within the limits of available sources. Relationships of bureaucracy with the military, especially in the east are crucial to understand. An aspect of this is military decision-making in the face of increasing budgetary pressures. Also noteworthy are challenges of decision-making in the face of outspoken public complaints and demonstrations, even in regimes that were far from democratic.

Another aspect of decisions: military blinding and blindsidedness and consequent blunders and blundering. How much did decision-making suffer from thinking too much in terms of older precedents and patterns, without allowing for change and new options and possibilities?

We should intensify exploration of interrelationships of religious and military dimensions in late antiquity. No definitive study of this interface exists and it may require more than one investigation to probe its limits and dimensions adequately. Specific case studies could fascinate students, whether in a graduate or undergraduate colloquium or lecture course. Among the questions: the degree to which religion can and did affect military effectiveness, including morale. Relationships of ecclesiastical leaders with Roman commanders and units have received some but inadequate attention. The scope of this subject includes well-trod issues of the Christianization of the armies (I consciously use the plural here) and the effects of Trinitarian and Christological disputes on military leadership and rank and file. Despite much scholarship none of these topics is exhausted. But the potential scope is vast.

Equally important with religion is debate on the role and meaning of ethnicity for late antique military history in many aspects. This can attract student attention, but it demands care with terminology. We are beginning to demystify aspects of ethnicity in late antique warfare although no consensus has emerged. This complex subject involves more than declaiming on barbarization or not. It involves Germanic and Hunnic warriors as well as Arabs. One of the greatest challenges for the investigator is trying to bridge the substantial gap between somewhat familiar Graeco-Roman sources and the often strange and very different Islamic ones for the late sixth and seventh and early eighth centuries. Problems have received identification even though solutions are not always at hand. Radical skepticism has failed.

Some students will find interesting empirical and theoretical cases in problems of understanding the increasing importance of the horse and related topics, such as the controversies about the adaptation and spread of use of the stirrup as well as various asymmetries in combat that do not restrict themselves to

horse and foot. Strategic (in contrast to tactical) asymmetries also may well interest some students. But such studies risk forcing the sources to derive overly simplistic hypotheses and conclusions.

Interrelationships of military and historical reasoning warrant investigation. How was military experience and wisdom remembered, retained, memorized and transferred in late antiquity? Was memory an aid or a hindrance for military decision-making? There are issues of social and institutional memory within the military as well as a different perspective on memory, I would guess, within the bureaucracy and even that may have varies between eastern and western provinces. Was there a transfer of consciousness of other military events and practices and any possible lessons, and if so, how? Existing military manuals provide only a limited bit of information on this. Late antique military thought (and there is such a thing) rests on the very extensive Graeco-Roman corpus of military manuals and narrative histories, however we all know we must remain wary of distortions in literary conventions that often frame descriptions of warfare.

Military psychology is difficult to elicit from our sources. Epistemological problems arise. Despite efforts of combat historians John Keegan and A. Goldsworthy much work awaits military historians to try to imagine the fascinating problem of how men responded to and reflected on challenges, including sudden and completely unexpected changes, ones without previous historical precedents or solutions ready to hand). We need more insights from social psychology to understand aspects of volatility, movement, stabilization and destabilization: how and why units may waver in combat with external or domestic foes and whether there are any patterns. Much more study of issues of male bonding and morale is desirable, as well as the issue of the psychology of close combat on foot or on horse. A related topic to investigate: late antique military frustration and exasperation, and conditions and policies likely to cause these, and the degree to which these were not present in previous centuries of Roman history. The history of unit rivalries and corps morale and self-consciousness awaits its historian, or more likely several historians.

We have taken a more modest appreciation of the great man in history as well as a sub-category of the great man, the great military reformer, but there remain issues of military reforms and reformers. *CAH* vol. XII provides an updated synthesis of the latest views on obscure and extremely controversial yet important alleged military reforms in the middle of the third century CE, including those of Gallienus as well as Diocletianic-Constantinian ones, as well as contemporary events and conditions. This volume's chapters mark an improvement over the outdated old edition of volume XII, which appeared in 1939 and which was overlaid with diverse and questionable influences from contemporary trends, ideology, and concepts of the 1930s. *CAH* XIII and XIV introduce students to principal topics and problems of interpretation of the obscure fifth century and sixth centuries. Late Antique military topics also receive more sophisticated coverage in vols. XII-XIV than they did in volumes I and II of the old *Cambridge Medieval History* (1911 and revisions in the 1920s). Yann Le Bohec has also written a good overview of late antique military history.[1]

Even though it can raise controversial issues of subjectivity and the indeterminate nature of qualitative evaluations, one cannot avoid or run from judgments on issues of tactical and operational superiority and changes in them and relative military effectiveness.

The economic underpinnings of the military are poorly understood. Military spending's relationship to local provincial regional economic conditions, whether growth or weakness, needs more inquiry, especially where heavy concentrations of troops were collected. Particularly poorly understood is the interrelationship of logistical supplies from parts of Anatolia for projected imperial campaigns that set out from the vicinity of Antioch in northern Syria. Old patterns in government's stationing of units and even of watch towers deserve assessment and mapping.

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[1] Yann le Bohec, *L'armée romaine sous le Bas-Empire*, Coll. Antiquité/Synthèses, Paris: Picard, 2006.

Here I terminate by listing several brief but disparate points:

1. Anecdotal flashes from hagiographic or secular narratives can help students to visualize and understand conditions and events but one must keep anecdotes in a reasonable perspective.
2. Case studies of battle and campaigns can still be useful. They will be of interest to some but not to all.
3. Among contributions by North American doyens of the field: Ramsay MacMullen's *Soldier and Civilian in the Late Roman Empire* was a pioneering volume of lasting value, even if seldom read today.
4. Translation. Military manuals such as Vegetius, *De rebus bellicis* and Mauricius deserve more use although they require critical evaluation; these three texts are very different. Better translations are now available although not all of them are easily and cheaply accessible. More inscriptions on military subjects need good English translations, with simple explanatory footnotes.
5. Students and instructors must confront the issue of military effectiveness and its criteria. What was it and on what did it rest?
6. A cautionary note. One cannot forget tedium and routine consumed much of the time of those who engaged in late antique military service.