

Military Organisation and Society in the post-Roman World

Veranstalter: Projekt 'Militarisierung frühmittelalterlicher Gesellschaften. Erscheinungsformen, Regulierung und Wahrnehmung im westeuropäischen Vergleich'

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The debate concerning the transformation of the Roman world into the early middle ages has for some time now captured the attention of historians. It focusses around two key questions: was this transformation a catastrophic collapse of the Roman Empire initiated by incoming hordes of barbarians? Or was it in fact the result of a longer, ongoing process that slowly but surely transformed the Roman world into a medieval one? Amongst this debate lies a curiously neglected question: What was the role of the military as part of this process? Above all, the concept of militarisation appears to be pivotal. Militarisation, seemingly a continuous process present throughout western Europe, came to characterise the Early Middle Ages. The role of the military, and the idea of militarisation, was the impetus for the creation of the Berlin-based research group who began their work in January 2016. Funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the project aims to describe the phenomenon of militarisation in a broad comparative perspective, and therefore explore one key aspect of the shift between Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

In August 2016, the research project held its first workshop at Freie Universität Berlin. The idea of the workshop was to discuss the concepts of the military and militarisation with specialists from different fields, inviting discourse between disciplines and enriching the project's comparative approach. Stefan Esders, whose department houses the research project, opened the workshop by welcoming speakers and guests, before Laury Sarti, head of the project, gave an introduction detailing its basic concepts. In this case, the definition of militarisation offered by Edward James was a key point of departure.¹ Indicators of a militarised society included structural aspects, such

as a lack of demarcation between soldier and civilian or the right of freemen to carry arms, but also aspects that relate to mentalities, for example the identification of the elite with its military functions and the glorification of war-like and heroic values in both public and private spheres. Additionally, weapons were used in ritual and ceremonial contexts, and were thus not solely instruments of physical violence.

Two hypotheses were offered for discussion: firstly, that continual contact with warfare and violence was deeply impactful in conditioning the cultural values and expectations of societies. Secondly, that the close connections between civilian and military populations perpetuated the notion that martial qualities and achievements were of great worth. Alongside these hypotheses, important questions include how to define militarisation, and what factors in particular trigger or diminish the effects of militarisation.

The opening paper of the workshop was presented by PHILIP RANCE (Berlin). Firstly, Rance drew attention to the paucity of source material for this period, an issue that continues to fuel the perception of a Byzantine 'Dark Age.' However, from these existing documents, Rance demonstrated that it is nevertheless possible to note an ongoing development in the Byzantine military. Markedly, the seventh century saw the military's increasing tendency to regionalisation and provincialisation. Furthermore, the way in which military forces were recruited and funded underwent change as the obligation to serve in the army became, in practice, hereditary. Military households, in which one member was registered as a soldier, had the opportunity to avoid sending their representative to fight by paying the state a fee. Funds raised in this manner were then used to remunerate foreign soldiers, so that by the tenth century the Byzantine army had clear indicators of a professionalised force. However, Rance demonstrated that the social standing of soldiers was increasingly diverse, so that wealthier soldiers were required to provide their poorer counterparts

¹ Edward James, *The Militarisation of Roman Society, 400-700*, in: Ann N. Jørgensen / Birthe L. Clausen (eds.), *Military Aspects of Scandinavian Society in a European Perspective, AD 1-1300*, Copenhagen 1997, p. 1-13.

with financial aid when campaigning. Indeed, poor rural soldiers were vulnerable to coercion by local landowners who could contract them as rent collectors or retainers, beginning the process that led to the rise of a Byzantine military aristocracy. Overall, Rance showed that it is not easy to define the extent to which society was militarised between c.600 and c.900 in the Byzantine Empire. The lack of consistent documentation limits analysis, allowing only pockets of illumination into the period. Additionally, the need for further research into the military aspects of the East Roman/Byzantine Empire at this time is required to advance the understanding of this topic.

ROLAND STEINACHER (Berlin) dealt with a much smaller (but no less important) region. Situated between the western and eastern parts of the Roman Empire and acting as a gateway to northern Italy, Pannonia has a long history of intense military activity. This made it a notable 'breeding ground' for warrior groups. Pannonian society was highly militarised as it was subjected to the repeated settlement of barbarian warrior groups, many of whom were tied to the Roman system as *foederati*. In general, Steinacher showed, there were constant and rapid shifts in the *gentes* who settled or passed through Pannonia. One particularly intense period began in the early fifth century as various groups labelled 'the Huns' entered the lower Danube region. Under Attila, the Huns occupied Pannonia whilst maintaining a threatening stance to continue extracting payments for peace from the Romans. This domination was ended in a great battle at the River Nedao in 454, wherein the barbarian groups turned against their Hunnic masters. This caused a reorganisation and resettlement of the barbarian groups, something which was later repeated following the battle at the Bolia River in 470. In this case, the victorious Ostrogoths were able to occupy Pannonian land and received official recognition from the Roman emperor. Steinacher concluded that it was these warrior groups who, in particular, shaped the fate of Pannonia as it shifted from the late antique to the early medieval period. However, understanding how far this 'hyper-militarised' society is a creation of the limited source material, and whe-

ther Pannonia was truly more militarised than other Roman regions such as the Rhine or Persian frontiers, will benefit greatly from further research and discussion.

The next paper was delivered by MATTHIAS HARDT (Leipzig), who provided an overview of the relationship between the Avars and Slavs. Beginning with the example of the siege of Constantinople in 626, Hardt demonstrated that the Avars and Slavs had, for over half a century, shared a history of military cooperation. However, this relationship was far from equal, as the Avars held the dominant position, exploiting the Slavs for warriors and winter-quarters. This led to a Slavic uprising against their Avar rule around the year 630. Essentially, Hardt demonstrated with a wide range of sources that the relationship between the Avars and Slavs was fundamentally based on violence and military exploitation. In the second part of his paper, Hardt presented some observations about the peculiarity of Avar residences. Hardt addressed the strange comments of Notker of St Gallen that Avar settlements (previously occupied by Huns) were enclosed among nine concentric rings made from trained trees and hedges. Such a practice, Hardt suggested, was not a fanciful invention but can in fact be evidenced through archaeology, place-name studies, and pictorial evidence across large swathes of territory. The creation and cultivation of such barriers and enclosures demonstrates one way in which these peoples controlled their landscapes and created physical military structures.

KAI GRUNDMANN (Berlin) presented the workshop's next instalment. This was the first of two papers to consider the former core-region of the Roman Empire. Grundmann demonstrated a three-fold structural division of the military (*militia armata*) under the control of the Ostrogothic kings; the palatine forces, border troops, and the mobile field army (*exercitus Gothorum*). The palace guards, a continuation of the late Roman units, served mainly symbolic and political roles for the nobility of the Ostrogothic court. Guardsmen interacted with the kingdom's elites and their ability to fight was a secondary concern. On the other hand, the border troops (closely resembling the late Roman *limitanei*), served

on the frontier regions and experienced intense interaction with local populations. Indeed, many border troops would have been local men themselves. Finally, the mobile field army was distinct from these forces, exhibiting a striking level of professionalism and separation from civilian populations. In fact, Grundmann noted, the *exercitus Gothorum* acted as a microcosmical military society with its own ethnic identity, military language, and jurisdiction. However, this neat theoretical structure was not as clear in practice, and Grundmann noted that soldiers represented only a small proportion of the overall population. Considering also the general separation of the military from the Roman population, Grundmann argued for a very low level of militarisation in Ostrogothic Italy.

GUIDO M. BERNDT (Berlin), responsible for the 'Lombard Italy' element of the Berlin project, began by considering the long historiographic tradition of Lombard history. In particular, Berndt noted that whilst the study of the Lombards has its own impressive background, the aspect of the Lombard military was notably underrepresented. In order to gain an idea of how far Lombard society was militarised, Berndt noted, a wide range of sources need to be taken into consideration, both written and archaeological, as different periods of Lombard history are documented with varying quality. Assessing the written sources, it soon becomes clear that they are saturated with conflict. As such, they give the impression that military activity was intense through continual series of engagements, whether against internal or external foes. Additionally, Berndt showed that the assessment of the whole of Italian society, an important consideration for militarisation, under the Lombards is a very difficult task. Indeed, the majority of Italian society is invisible in the sources. Furthermore, to gain an understanding of the conflicts of Lombard Italy, one must also consider the neighbours and enemies of the Lombards, including the Byzantines, Franks and Avars. Without this, a complete picture of the epoch cannot be obtained. Berndt concluded with two examples of warfare as recorded by Paul the Deacon, drawing attention to the dramatic style of the narrative that creates the impression of con-

stant and intense warfare in Lombard Italy.

LEIF PETERSEN's (Trondheim) contribution to the workshop took as a starting point the Roman civil wars and societal turmoil of the fifth century. Petersen discussed how the late Roman *munera*, a regular tax in the form of labour obligation, continued to be levied throughout this chaotic period by those local landowners who had traditionally organised and administered this system for the Roman state. However, these landowners increasingly used the administrative benefits of this system to support rebellious Roman warlords and the barbarian peoples who ruled the Roman successor states. Petersen demonstrated that the system was used heavily in Aquitaine under both the Visigoths and Franks, as well as in the Frankish heartlands and later Visigothic Spain. This allowed landowners to raise armed retinues based on their wealth, and make use of the logistical advantages offered by such obligations. For example, Petersen noted the continued practice of dividing up city walls in *pedaturae*, 'footages', in order to task certain groups with the wall's maintenance and defence in times of war. Finally, Petersen showed that these obligations began to be subsidised in cash by the Ostrogoths in Provence, and that such levies can be seen into sixth-century Francia. However, regular taxes in cash were slowly rendered defunct as military and labour obligations became more universal on the land-owning population, and so the Frankish kings could fulfil logistical and military needs this way. Overall, Petersen's paper highlighted how Roman military structures continued, with certain developments, into the early medieval period.

In the final session of the workshop, two papers considered early medieval Britain. The first was presented by ELLORA BENNETT (Berlin). Responsible for the Anglo-Saxon element of the Berlin project, Bennett began by commenting on the tendency for historians of the Anglo-Saxon military to focus on the ninth century onwards, as these centuries saw the two Viking ages and the Norman Conquest. The result is that the earlier period is frequently explained through generalisations and anachronism, such as the pervasive idea that the early Anglo-Saxon army consisted of a mass levy of free peasant farmers. As such, the

paper highlighted notable periods of conflict between the *adventus Saxonum* and the end of the eighth century, and gave an overview of the historiographic traditions that continue to dominate the understanding of early Anglo-Saxon warfare. In discussing key topics to the study of the early Anglo-Saxon military, particular attention was drawn to the debate surrounding mounted warriors. In this case, Bennett noted the pictorial and written evidence for mounted warriors, such as the Aberlemno Stone that depicts Northumbrians and Picts fighting on horseback at the battle of Nechtansmere in 685, and the increasing archaeological evidence for Anglo-Saxon equestrianism. Whilst this by no means indicates the presence of distinct cavalry units, it does highlight how assumptions about how the Anglo-Saxons fought must continue to be challenged. Finally, Bennett concluded that Anglo-Saxon England appears to have been primarily militarised on cultural lines, and can be interpreted as fitting several of James' militarisation criteria. Further research, particularly into Anglo-Saxon perceptions of war and warriors, will be informative in this case.

RYAN LAVELLE (Winchester) presented the final paper of the workshop, assessing the military reforms of Alfred the Great and his successes against the Danes. As a starting point, Lavelle discussed how the reign of Alfred has traditionally been seen as the pivotal moment in Anglo-Saxon military history, as Alfred is credited with introducing key reforms. This is an assumption which was taken up by Victorian scholars and still continues to condition modern study. Lavelle discussed the evidence which is directly or indirectly associated with Alfred's reign, and the representation of the military structures therein. In particular, Lavelle noted that the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 893, detailing how the army should be split into two parts, is the only direct evidence for attributing the reforms to Alfred's kingship. In fact, Lavelle argues, much of the proof that these military reforms belonged to Alfred's reign is evidential 'dark matter'. Arguable, one example of this is the *Burghal Hidage*, a document which dates to the turn of the ninth century, and has consistently been seen as Alfredian despite some inconsistencies. Lavelle then discussed the

ideas of Anglo-Saxon military obligation in modern scholarship, using evidence from the *Chronicle* and the much later Domesday Book. Overall, Lavelle's contribution challenged the traditional interpretation of military reform at the end of the ninth century, demonstrating that there were key developments in military structure which cannot solely be attributed to Alfred's military 'genius', but also to wider developments in lordship and kingdom formation.

Phillip von Rummel and Lukas Bothe led the final discussion from an archaeological and legal perspective, each giving a summary of conclusions conditioned by their different disciplines. Approached from several different perspectives, it was observed that the phenomenon of militarisation could be defined differently depending on the epoch and society. Certainly, Prussian militarisation would not present identically to societies in late antiquity. This case demonstrates that levels of violence need not be a primary factor, and that a society that is internally peaceful may still be considered militarised. Militarisation is not a static state of being but rather a shifting process that can present itself in ways individual to the time and society. It was also discussed as to whether it was the process of militarisation or the reduction of the civilian sphere that shaped post-Roman societies; an interesting angle that must also be considered as research develops. Overall, it was discussed that militarisation was in some way a reaction to stresses on society, and the term 'militarisation' can be used to both define and describe. Further interdisciplinary work on the project, sharing in theoretical and methodological ideas, will make it possible to uncover new insights into the phenomenon of militarisation.

Conference Overview:

Philip Rance (Berlin): Soldier and Civilian in the Byzantine Empire c. 600–c. 900. A Militarised Society?

Roland Steinacher (Berlin): Pannonia as the Empire's Drill-Ground

Matthias Hardt (Leipzig): Avars and Slavs – A Military Relation?

Kai Grundmann (Berlin): Clipeus and Gladi-

us of the Roman People? Administration and Operations of the Ostrogothic Army in Italy

Guido M. Berndt (Berlin): The Role of the Military in Lombard Italy. Some Preliminary Considerations

Leif I. R. Petersen (Trondheim): The Imperial Foundations of Frankish and Visigothic Military Organization: Some Methodological Considerations

Ellora Bennett (Berlin): The Anglo-Saxon Military Before Alfred. An Overview

Ryan Lavelle (Winchester): The Development of Military Reforms under Alfred the Great of Wessex (871–899). A Review of Current Scholarship

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