

RICHARD EVANS – SHAUN TOUGHER (eds), *Generalship in Ancient Greece, Rome and Byzantium*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022. 376 pp. – ISBN 978-1-4744-5996-9

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The sixteen papers in this collection focus on various periods from Archaic Greece to the Byzantine era, bearing witness to the lively state of scholarship on the role of generals in the ancient and medieval worlds. All originate from a panel on ‘The Art of Generalship: Late Antique, Byzantine, and Chinese Ideals’ held in 2014 at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds. They touch upon an impressive number of topics, such as the significance of gender and virtue (TOUGHER) or the role played by philosophy and politics (ROCKWELL, MCAULEY). In their introduction, the editors identify five common themes that run through the book: (1) the role of speeches and exhortations, (2) gender (especially in relation to virtues like courage), (3) cross-cultural comparison (e.g., Byzantine, Arab, and Persian ‘best men’ in MACDONALD), (4) the commemoration of victory and defeat (e.g., the reception of Leonidas and the defeat at Thermopylae in EVANS), and (5) the intersection of a general’s political and military roles.

The volume’s stated aim is to attain a more holistic view of the subject than has hitherto been achieved. One also hopes for a shift of ‘focus from the study of the careers of individual generals to the ideas and ideals that underpinned them’ (p. 5). This is certainly a welcome approach, since scholars discussing the art of generalship have long tended to concentrate on individuals.<sup>1</sup> The book emerges amid a growing interest in the thinking that shaped a general’s role. What is especially notable is the inclusion of China: discussing Chinese generalship in the late Tang Dynasty goes significantly beyond the traditional horizons of Greco-Roman warfare, inviting comparisons that shed new light on the ancient Mediterranean. The

1. Recent examples include MICHAEL P. FERGUSON – IAN WORTHINGTON, *The Military Legacy of Alexander the Great. Lessons for the Information Age*. London 2023 and JOSEPH ROSIMAN, *The Classical Art of Command. Eight Greek Generals Who Shaped the History of Warfare*. Oxford 2017.

book is a must-read for anyone interested in cutting-edge research on ancient generalship from a thematically broad and cross-cultural perspective. It will be of interest to specialists and non-specialists alike.

The chapters are arranged chronologically. In the first one, CEZARY KUCEWICZ discusses the ideas that underpinned the varied roles and responsibilities of generals in Archaic Greece. Till recently, the prevailing opinion among scholars was the one originally articulated by HANSON, who argued that before the second Persian invasion of Greece (480–479 BC), Greek warfare had an unwritten code of conduct and battles consisted of melee clashes between ostensibly equal units, involving little to no generalship.<sup>2</sup> Military leaders were effectively warrior-generals modelled after Achilles. This view has been repeatedly challenged over the past two decades and recent scholarship has revealed the prevalence of military deception and strategy in early Greek warfare.<sup>3</sup> It is in the context of this long-standing debate that KUCEWICZ explores ideas behind the art of the early Greek general. The author outlines some important aspects of Archaic generalship which can be seen in Homer's epics and in the poetry of Archilochus and Tyrtaeus. Some key responsibilities of the Archaic general become apparent, including positive exhortation, army organisation, maintenance of unit cohesion, and the ability to lay successful ambushes. Alongside these attributes, the general still had to embody the heroic warrior ethos as typified by the likes of Achilles or Ajax and so, in addition to being a shrewd commander, he was also expected to be personally courageous. However, while courage and martial prowess were necessary virtues for a good Archaic general, they were far from his only important characteristic. The general had to be more than an Achilles, he also had to be an Odysseus and a Nestor. KUCEWICZ then points out that the institutionalisation of Greek armies (especially in Athens) which occurred in the sixth century BC led to an increased emphasis on strategy and tactics and a reduction in the concern for discipline. Thanks to the rise of complex chains of command, generals were no longer required to maintain discipline in the way that they had been before. To illustrate this development, the author uses the understudied figures of Peisistratus and Cleomenes as examples. They emerge as competent generals, skilled in military planning and deception. What comes out of this paper is that despite some changes in the art of

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2. DAVID VICTOR HANSON, *The Western Way of War. Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. London – Berkeley 1989.

3. E.g., ROEL KONIJNENDIJK, *Playing Dice for the Polis. Pitched Battle in Greek Military Thought*, TAPA 151/1 (2021), pp. 1–33.

generalship from the Archaic to the Classical period, there was a remarkable degree of continuity. The traditional view of the Achillean warrior-general is convincingly challenged and the role of the Archaic general is revealed to have been dynamic, involving numerous strategical and tactical duties. RICHARD EVANS explores the commemoration of the battle of Thermopylae recorded by Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus and shows the literary dimension of generalship in antiquity. EVANS discusses how a ‘failed’ general like Leonidas came to be a renowned figure who exemplified *andreia*. After providing an overview of the historical accounts of the battle, the author highlights the preponderance of supernatural elements found in Herodotus. Indeed, the supernatural features more prominently in the battle of Thermopylae than in any other Greco-Persian battle in the *Histories*. This of course highlights the inventiveness of Herodotus’ account. We then examine the epitaphs attributed to Simonides commemorating the battle. EVANS argues that the image of the battle and the figure of Leonidas as a general were to a large extent shaped by Herodotus and Simonides and by their portrayal of events. The battle itself was a strategical and a tactical disaster. Nevertheless, it became a shining example of heroic generalship. No Greek author ever described the battle as a failure or used it as an example of strategic incompetence. The reason for this, EVANS argues, is that the literary construction surrounding Thermopylae retrospectively changed the way in which the episode viewed. In this paper, we see clearly just how malleable the idea of the ideal general was in the ancient world. History could very easily have remembered Leonidas and the last stand of the Spartans as example of folly, had the Greeks been conquered by the Persians or had there been no Herodotus or Simonides to commemorate the defeat. Thus, we are reminded that literature influenced generalship just as much as generalship influenced literature.

We see even more of the overlap between the art of the general and the art of writing in an illuminating paper by NICHOLAS ROCKWELL, who focuses on the characteristics of political and military leaders in Plato’s dialogues. Generals, while subordinate to statesmen in the ideal or best society (Kallipolis) of the *Republic* and in the second best, but still idealised, society presented in the *Laws* (Magnaesia), still ought to possess an array of skills and virtues. A military leader must have knowledge of fighting in armour and tactics while also embodying virtue (especially courage).<sup>4</sup> In order to instil virtue into his soul, the ideal general would receive an

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4. E.g., Plato, *Laches*, 182b–c.

education which included philosophical enquiry and contemplation. The requirements for the good general and the good statesmen, while involving some different skills, were remarkably similar. The paragon of virtue for Plato was Socrates, and it is Socrates who appears as a model the ideal soldier.<sup>5</sup> From this paper we see how closely interlinked military and political roles were in Platonic philosophy. Thus, we can better understand some of the contemporary expectations of generals in Classical Greece.

ALEX MCAULEY explores the varied roles of Seleucid generals. Once again, we see the intersection of military and political responsibility. The author aims to use the general's figure in order to straddle the line between the traditional dichotomy of the 'the military' and 'the political'. Scholarship traditionally separated the two, but work done in recent decades has shown the dynamic interplay between these spheres in the Hellenistic world.<sup>6</sup> Alexander of Sardis is taken as a representative of the Seleucid general and the examination of his figure clearly shows the complex nature of the role. MCAULEY classifies early Seleucid generals through the following criteria: (1) background, status, and descent; (2) proximity to the king; (3) military prowess; (4) attestation of those agents involved in the administration of the empire. The Seleucid general emerges in an expansive role covering broad empire-wide strategic duties and day-to-day administrative tasks. *Strategoï* like Alexander of Sardis played a crucial part in both the consolidation and the functioning of the Seleucid Empire.

In MICHAEL TAYLOR's chapter, the knowledge of Roman generals is examined with emphasis on the rotation system of the Middle Republic. Consuls would be elected yearly with the possibility of extension. Such short terms meant that generals could not acquire much experience of generalship while on the job. TAYLOR highlights the uniqueness of the Roman rotation system in the ancient world before analysing the types of knowledge that generals needed. In doing so, the author is able to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of this system. The types of military knowledge considered are: (1) technical knowledge (tactics, logistics, etc.); (2) theatre-specific knowledge; (3) grand strategic knowledge. The Roman system allowed for consuls to have already acquired significant technical knowledge through ten years of military experience, five of which would be spent as a military tribune. A general would also acquire civic and administrative skills by

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5. For Socrates and his personal bravery, especially during the battle of Delium (424 BC), see Plato, *Apology* 28d–29a, Plato, *Laches*, 181, and Plato, *Symposium*, 219e–221b.

6. E.g., ANGELOS CHANIOTIS, *War in the Hellenistic World*. Oxford 2005.

working his way up the senatorial *cursus*. However, Roman generals were often lacking in theatre-specific knowledge, since they served such short terms. They made up for this deficiency by using the knowledge of their own troops and by utilising military intelligence through scouts to get a lay of the land. While the rotation system deprived commanders of theatre-specific knowledge, it supplied them with good grand strategic knowledge. Consuls had often served in several provinces across the empire before being elected, and the senate consisted of many men who had served as consuls. Thus, Roman generals often had excellent Mediterranean-wide strategic knowledge. TAYLOR convincingly argues that the rotation system of the Middle Republic made the army more robust than it would otherwise have been.

DAVID NOLAN analyses the role of *fortuna* in Julius Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum*. The author acknowledges the propagandistic nature of the *Bellum*, but rightly suggests that the account still contains important insights into Roman warfare and generalship. NOLAN thoughtfully examines the presence and absence of *fortuna* in Caesar's narrative to understand how exactly Caesar understood the term and how he used it. *Fortuna* appears to have been a didactic tool for Caesar. NOLAN also compares *fortuna* to other words which feature prominently in the *Bellum Gallicum*, such as *virtus*. *Fortuna* had multiple meanings for Caesar, and he used it for different purposes. Some of those uses reveal aspects of Caesar's generalship. We learn, for instance, that courage or *virtus* was subordinate to good generalship. Indeed, the use of *virtus* in the face of bad fortune was a sign of desperation and could not function well without proper planning. We also learn that a good general should not use unforeseen circumstances, as presented by *fortuna*, as an excuse for failure. He should prepare for the unexpected and thus should not be overcome by accidents. Indeed, an examination of Caesar's use of fortune reveals the importance of risk aversion and minimisation in his thinking. For him, a general should avoid any unnecessary risks and rely as little as possible on luck. It is only in book 6 that fortune becomes a powerful, fickle force that strongly influences events. This change in *fortuna*'s role was, NOLAN suggests, a result of Caesar's frustration at Ambiorix's evasive tactics. NOLAN states that at this point *fortuna* had become like the Greek *τύχη*: 'a generally fickle power that both gives and takes away' (p. 114). However, it is worth pointing out that *τύχη* had multiple meanings for Greek authors, even in a historical context: it could mean anything from a personified fickle force to unforeseen circum-

stances, and even simply things not properly understood.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, a close look at *fortuna* in the *Bellum Gallicum* reveals several prominent features of Caesar's generalship that might otherwise go unnoticed.

DANIEL CROSBY uses both well-known and underappreciated sources to investigate the memory of Varus in Tacitus' *Annales*. While virtually all other sources that mention Varus and the disaster at Teutoburg Forest (9 AD) portray him as the model of a negligent general, Tacitus' depiction is more nuanced. Tacitus, according to CROSBY, presents two competing memories of Varus on the Germans' and the Romans' side. For the Germans, he was a symbol of their liberty and freedom from Roman yoke. For the Romans, on the other hand, he was a symbol of loss and recovery. The two competing ideologies battle it out parallel to the military battles in the *Annales*. Ultimately, the German perspective prevails. This chapter, much like RICHARD EVANS's chapter in this same volume, shows how literary traditions can transform perceptions of the art of the general.

DAVID POTTER looks at the generalship of the emperor Decius and the strategic mistakes that led to his defeat and death at the Battle at Abritus (AD 251). The author examines Decius' strategy in light of the recently discovered passages of Dexippus' *Scythian Affairs* (*Skythika*) along-side other literary sources, as well as archaeological evidence. The evidence, POTTER demonstrates, reveals that Decius made strategic errors by poorly planning his campaign against the Goths led by Cniva. As a result, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time to meet the Gothic raiders. This paper clearly shows the importance of considering multiple forms of evidence when evaluating ancient generalship.

CONOR WHATELY asks what kind of general the fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus held in the highest regard. WHATELY argues against the notion that Ammianus favoured the heroic generalship modelled on Alexander the Great. He suggests that Ammianus cautioned against this and instead favoured the so-called 'Odyssean' mode of generalship. Back in the day, WHEELER distinguished between two modes of generalship in the ancient world: the 'Achillean' sort which involved heroic leadership from the front lines (Alexander was the example par excellence of this), and

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7. E.g., Suda s.v. τύχη, tau 1232, 1233, 1234, [Suda on-line](#), tr. ROBERT DYER, 2003. For some recent work on the complex role of *tyche* in Polybius, see FRANK W. WALBANK, Fortune (*tychē*) in Polybius. In: JOHN MARINCOLA (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World). Oxford 2007, pp. 325–331; RENÉ BROUWER, Polybius and Stoic *Tyche*. GRBS 51.1 (2011), pp. 111–132.

the ‘Odyssean’ kind which was typified by the use of stratagems and military deception.<sup>8</sup> WHATELY compares Julian’s role at the Battle of Strasbourg (358) to the role of Valens at the Battle of Adrianople (378). Both emerge as non-heroic generals, since neither of them lead from the front or perform any deeds on the battlefield worthy of Alexander or Achilles. For Ammianus, the difference lay in Julian’s superior tactical skill. Thus, Ammianus was not favouring the heroic mode of generalship. Furthermore, whenever a general acted heroically (e.g., Julian at Pirsabora in 363), it did not end well for them. Therefore, we see that Ammianus, far from favouring heroic generals modelled after Achilles, preferred generals with tactical acumen and thus, more like Odysseus. In his paper, WHATELY builds upon his previous work on Procopius whom, he suggests, like Ammianus favoured the tactical Odyssean-type general (e.g., Belisarius) over the more heroic generals like Totila.<sup>9</sup> Once again we see interplay between literature and generalship: the two continually influenced each other.

MICHAEL STEWART’s chapter ‘The Fine Line between Courage and Fear in the *Vandal War*’ examines the role of fear and highlights its central place in military and political causation, alongside Providence and fortune (τύχη) in Procopius. This discussion on emotion (especially fear) and virtue in the context of late antique warfare is especially welcome and comes amidst growing interest in the subject.<sup>10</sup> STEWART shows the centrality of fear by highlighting its role in various military episodes throughout the *Vandal War*. While Procopius’ use of fear is certainly inspired by and perhaps based on Thucydides, the author argues that his distinction between good and bad fear and the importance of rational fear suggest a didactic intention. Procopius emphasises Belisarius’s ability to turn fear into courage. He also gives fear a positive or negative role depending on the circumstances. Indeed, Procopius’ presentation of fear and its utility are reminiscent of the remarks made in other works from the period, including military manuals like Maurice’s *Strategikon*. STEWART’s paper will hopefully inspire further research on emotions not only in the rest of Procopius’ *Wars*, but also

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8. EVERETT L. WHEELER, *Stratagem and the Vocabulary of Military Trickery*. Leiden 1988, pp. xiii–xiv; IDEM, *The General as Hoplite*. In: VICTOR DAVIS HANSON (ed.), *Hoplites. The Classical Greek Battle Experience*. London 1991, pp. 121–172 (137–138).

9. CONOR WHATELY, *Battles and Generals. Combat, Culture, and Didacticism in Procopius’ Wars*. Leiden 2016, pp. 188–195.

10. E.g., ŁUKASZ RÓŻYCKI *Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity. A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises*. Leiden 2021.

in other late antique and Byzantine histories.

Another general to appear in Procopius' *Vandal War* is John Troglita, the brother of Pappus. MARTINE DE MARRE evaluates John's competence as a general by comparing his portrayal in several sources, particularly Corippus and Procopius. John had fought under Belisarius during the war with the Vandals (533–534). He later returned to Africa in 546, when he was made *magister militum Africae* in order to squash the rebellions in the recently conquered territory. While John receives little attention in Procopius, he is the central figure in Corippus' epic poem the *Iohannis* or *De Bellis Libycis*. The author provides a balanced evaluation of John's generalship by looking at several aspects, including his ability to organise his troops and his capacity to listen to good advice. From this assessment, John appears to have been a competent and relatively successful general, even when compared to someone like Belisarius. He was not, however, without his flaws. We can see from this study that it is useful to consider works of poetry alongside traditional sources for military history.

EVE MACDONALD's insightful chapter 'The Best Men: Cross-Cultural Command in the 630s AD' focusses on the common threads connecting great generals in the Sasanian, Byzantine, and Arabic worlds. Figures like the Sasanian general Rostam were celebrated cross-culturally for their heroism and their masculinity. Particular attention is paid to the commanders at important battles like al-Yarmuk (636) and al-Qadisiyyah (637/638). We see how different military figures appear in a variety of sources including, the *Shahnameh* and Al-Tabari's *History*. Across all of these different sources, features like piety and heroism were common among the 'best men' of the era. The paper's cross-cultural approach offers an important and fresh perspective on the image of generalship in the late antique and early Byzantine period. This will hopefully encourage future research on cross-cultural approaches to the art of the general.

DAVID A. GRAFF takes us far away from the Byzantine world to explore the role of the general in China. He examines the use of speech and exhortation by military leaders in the late Tang Dynasty (618–907). In stark contrast to Greco-Roman generals, ancient Chinese military leaders did not typically give speeches to rouse their troops. In an unusual occurrence, used by the author as a case study, General Tian Yue addressed the soldiers and the common folk in Wei-zhou. Closely analysing this example and comparing it to several others, GRAFF shows that while speeches were not a traditional part of an ancient Chinese general's repertoire, they had



become more common by the late Tang period. As a rule, such speeches would be delivered in times of desperation and typically involved material inducements. The reason for this, GRAFF argues, was that by the time of Tian Yue, soldiers were no longer part-time farmers; they were now full-time soldiers who depended on military service for their livelihoods. Thus, material inducements were far more effective and, in some cases, necessary to keep soldiers in line.

Moving back westwards, PHILIP RANCE investigates the reception of Onasander's *Strategikos* in Byzantine military literature. The *Strategikos* is a first-century treatise on the military and ethical qualities of the ideal Roman general.<sup>11</sup> Unlike other Greco-Roman military treatises that were popular in the Byzantine period, such as Aelian's *Taktike* and Polyaeus' *Strategemata*, the *Strategikos* was not very technical and focused more on principles concerning a good general's moral character. This is probably one of the reasons for the enduring popularity and applicability of Onasander's treatise. The *Strategikos* strongly influenced Byzantine military manuals, including Maurice's *Strategikon* and Leo VI's *Taktika*. As RANCE notes, this influence concerns the form and arrangement of these treatises, rather than their technical content. Nevertheless, Onasander's *Strategikos* was perhaps the most influential military treatise alongside Aelian's *Taktike*. The manuscript transmission of the work, which RANCE explores in detail, reveals that Onasander attracted editorial interest even in the so-called Byzantine 'Dark Age'. One of the most fascinating results of the investigations in this paper is the possibility that Onasander became especially popular in the Middle Byzantine period because of a conscious desire on the part of the Byzantines to appear more Roman. *Romanitas* was a prominent feature in the literature of the period, and the *Strategikos* was framed in exclusively Roman terms. Aside from the invaluable insights into the transmission and reception of Onasander, RANCE's chapter shows how generalship in military literature influenced notions of identity and was in its turn influenced by them.

SHAUN TOUGHER also draws upon military manuals, among other sources, to explore the role of gender in Byzantine generalship. The Macedonian Dynasty (867–1056) is notable for its non-campaigning emperors and its successful eunuch generals. TOUGHER looks at how both militarily inac-

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11. For some recent work on military literature, see JAMES T. CHLUP – CONOR WHATELY (eds), *Greek and Roman Military Manuals: Genre and History*. London 2020; CONOR WHATELY, *Military Literature in the Medieval Roman World and Beyond*. Leiden 2024 (forthcoming).

tive emperors and stereotypically effeminate eunuch-generals could successfully lay claim to the virtue of courage. Many of the Macedonian emperors did not lead armies, with the notable exceptions of Basil I and Basil II. Nevertheless, they were still considered supreme commander of their troops through their divinely ordained rulership and, as such, could claim to be courageous. Eunuch generals like Basil Lekapenos (the *parakoimomenos*), on the other hand, led armies successfully and were praised for their bravery and their heroism. Indeed, it was only when they were unsuccessful that eunuch generals were criticised and mocked for their effeminacy. As TOUGHER observes, they were gendered according to their performance on the battlefield. In this chapter, we see the fascinating interplay between gender and virtue: it seems that the relationship between the two in the context of generalship was more nuanced than it might at first appear.

In his paper on the relationship between virtue, *tyche*, persuasion, and the Byzantine general, DIMITRIS KRALLIS points out that Byzantine armies were, in a sense, reflections of the Byzantine state: they were a marching *civitas*. Greco-Roman tradition linked military camps to cities, soldiers to citizens, and generals to politicians. In light of this, the author examines the role of military leaders as reflections of political leaders. If the two were linked, we must surely expect similar qualities to be desirable for both. KRALLIS notes that Byzantine historians often used *τύχη* in a way that coupled military and political virtues. In both cases, deliberation and courage was emphasised. Oratory was another common denominator between the political and the military spheres in Byzantium. A general, like a statesman, was expected to have persuasive skills in order to raise the morale of his men. He was also expected to deliberate with his officers and advisors in the same way that an emperor should. According to KRALLIS, the sources' emphasis on deliberation suggests that a Byzantine general was supposed to be as concerned with cautious planning as with bold heroism. This final chapter combines various themes from the previous ones, including heroic vs cautious generalship, the part played by *τύχη* (*fortuna*), the relationship between a general's political and military roles, and the use of speeches and exhortations.

In sum, the volume brings together a variety of themes and persistently addresses the overlap between the political, military, and literary dimensions of generalship in the ancient and Byzantine worlds. It offers cutting-edge scholarly treatment of the art of the ancient general. Perhaps its most pervasive, if not always explicitly stated 'subplot', is the dynamic relationship

between the art of the general and that of the author: we see how texts both political and military influenced people's ideas of what a perfect general was to be like, while real generals' actions and conduct would in their turn shape military literature. The authors and the editors should be praised for their chronologically and geographically broad approach. Their book will hopefully inspire further research.

**Keywords**

generalship; literature; military history