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SPRING CONFERENCE – 5 MAY 2007
LADY MARGARET HALL, OXFORD

THE CLASSICAL LEGACY IN WARFARE

Our Spring Conference was a particularly noteworthy event, not only for the content of the four excellent papers given by our speakers but also because we were able to welcome the President and the Secretary of the International Commission. A note of the remarks made by Luc De Vos, the President, appears elsewhere in this issue.

We also announced the formal launch of our website www.bcmh.org.uk which we hope to develop over the next few months.

I am extremely grateful, as ever, to our speakers for taking a great deal of trouble to send me their papers, fully referenced. This will enable those who were not at the Conference to get a very full picture of the proceedings.

Andy Grainger



Speakers & Topics:

Professor Philip Sabin, (Department of War Studies, King's College London)
"Ancient Military Theory and the Forgotten Context of the Pre-Gunpowder Battle"

Doctor David Whetham (Defence Studies Department, Joint Services Command and Staff College) *"Vegetius and the Middle Ages"*

Doctor Jorit Wintjes (University of Würzburg) *"Man, Soldier, Tyrant – The Perception of Caesar from Machiavelli to Napoleon III"*

Professor Brian Bond (President Emeritus, BCMH)
"Fuller, Liddell Hart and Classical Military History"



ANCIENT MILITARY WISDOM AND THE FORGOTTEN CONTEXT OF PRE-GUNPOWDER BATTLE

**Professor Philip Sabin
King's College London**

The recent need for government intervention to save the Ancient History A level in British schools has once again highlighted the schizophrenic nature of our relationship with antiquity.¹ On the one hand, many people continue to be fascinated by the spectacle and the epic stories of the ancient world, as is shown by the continuing stream of books, computer games and Hollywood films based on classical themes. On the other hand, the 'classical education' which previous generations considered so valuable has come under increasing threat from the naked instrumentalism associated with school league tables and with the commodification of education as merely a means to the end of obtaining lucrative employment.² If classicists are to avoid being relegated to an arcane and beleaguered fringe of scholarly endeavour, they will have to overcome any élitist reticence about tapping into the intrinsic popular interest in aspects of ancient history, while also demonstrating more clearly than before that classical learning really can provide direct and tangible benefits for our ability to cope with the challenges of the 21st century.

The field of ancient military history is arguably the most important single element of classical scholarship as a whole with regard to addressing this twin challenge.³ It is war which people today tend to find the most fascinating aspect of antiquity, thanks in part to the gripping stories of 'great captains' such as Alexander, Hannibal, Scipio and Caesar. Popular interest in these long distant conflicts is such that a scholar like Adrian Goldsworthy is able to make a living purely as a commercial author, without any university post.⁴ There has also been a long tradition among military forces of seeking to use past experience, including that from the ancient world, as a means of developing their conceptual ability to handle current and future conflicts. Although Greek and Roman military wisdom now plays a negligible role in armed forces' thinking compared to the dominant influence which it had just a few centuries ago, the ancient Chinese theorist Sun Tzu is studied much more widely, not just by warriors but by businessmen seeking to gain an edge in the corporate struggle.⁵

In this paper, I will argue that the understandable tendency of modern observers to focus almost exclusively on potential parallels and areas of similarity between ancient and modern experience is in fact misleading and even pernicious. It tends to produce superficial analogies, and to privilege vague and enigmatic ancient sources like Sun Tzu, while the more practical, specific and down to earth points of Greek and Roman writers are dismissed as obsolete. If we instead see the many differences between the ancient and modern eras as

¹ 'Ancient History in schools is to become a thing of the past', *The Times*, March 31st 2007.

² 'Brown targets work skills', *The Times Higher*, July 6th 2007.

³ The latest scholarship on this entire field will soon be summarised in the definitive 2 volume *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* which I have co-edited with Hans van Wees and Michael Whitby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴ Adrian Goldsworthy, *Caesar* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006).

⁵ Mark McNeilly, *Sun Tzu and the Art of Modern Warfare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). The classic translation of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* is tellingly by US Marine general Samuel Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).



positive assets rather than inconvenient obstacles to a search for coincidental resemblances, then antiquity becomes less of an inexorably wasting asset and more of a valuable alternative perspective which can be used to widen our understanding of the diversity of human experience. Just as studying the geology of other planets and moons through space exploration has cast invaluable new light on principles previously only accessible through the single example of our own Earth, so the ancient world allows us to glimpse how the enduring human activity of war may be shaped by a very different cultural, technological and strategic environment. By celebrating rather than ignoring this diversity, it becomes possible to gain a much better understanding of the strategic principles underlying the changing military experience of the past few millennia, and hence to gain greater insight into ancient and modern conflicts alike.

Timelessness & Obsolescence

There is a decidedly ‘all or nothing’ character to the way in which ancient military wisdom has been handled hitherto. At one extreme is the presumption of timelessness, with contextual changes over time being largely ignored. This was the dominant model within the ancient world itself, as is very clearly illustrated by the way in which theorists like Frontinus, Onasander and Vegetius hoovered up examples from across centuries of history to bolster their composite arguments. Writers such as Asclepiodotus, Arrian and Aelian even continued to reproduce Hellenistic organisational and tactical theory generations after the Roman conquest had made phalanx warfare a thing of the past.⁶ In the medieval and early modern eras, this assumption of continuity and at most cyclical change persisted, through at times almost slavish adherence to classical wisdom. My favourite examples are Machiavelli’s assertion that gunpowder was just a passing fad like scythed chariots and war elephants, and de Saxe’s verbatim reproduction of Polybius’ 2,000 word analysis of the superiority of the legion to the phalanx, to justify de Saxe’s similar proposals to counter the pikemen of his own day.⁷ Although such direct appeals to ancient precedent have become much less common as the face of war has changed, when they do occur, they still tend to downplay contextual differences, as with the battle of Cannae, which has become a metaphor for generic encirclement of the enemy and has been cited as the inspiration for the Schlieffen Plan in 1914 and for Schwarzkopf’s ‘Hail Mary’ manoeuvre in the Gulf in 1991.⁸

Clausewitz was one of the first modern writers to shift to the other extreme approach to ancient military wisdom, namely to dismiss it altogether as obsolete. In book 2, he wrote that ‘The further back one goes, the less useful military history becomes, growing poorer and barer at the same time. The history of antiquity is without doubt the most useless and the barest of all’. He went on to explain that ‘the further one progresses from broad generalities to details, the less one is able to select examples and experiences from remote times. We are in no position to evaluate the relevant events correctly, nor to apply them to the wholly different means we use today’.⁹ Clausewitz does not in fact ignore classical examples altogether, but he mentions them only rarely, even when they would fit in very well with his

⁶ A useful overview of these various theorists is Brian Campbell’s ‘Teach Yourself how to be a General’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987) pp.13-29.

⁷ Machiavelli, *Discourses* II.17; Maurice de Saxe, *My Reveries upon the Art of War*, translated by Thomas Phillips in *Roots of Strategy* (Dehra Dun: Natraj, 1989) pp.275-83.

⁸ Terence Holmes, ‘Classical Blitzkrieg: The Untimely Modernity of Schlieffen’s Cannae Programme’, *Journal of Military History* 67 (2003) pp.745-71.

⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited & translated by Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) pp.173-4.



own model of war. For instance, I have long felt that his insightful remarks about how a bold general can overcome friction and inertia to move the war along at a rapid pace fit Caesar at least as well as Napoleon, but Clausewitz does not make the point himself. Ancient precedent has been somewhat rehabilitated in universal histories of war like those by Keegan and van Creveld, but classical military theorists such as Vegetius who once enjoyed such popularity are now almost forgotten, as in the definitive volumes edited by Earle and later by Paret which trace the ‘Makers of Modern Strategy’ only as far back as Machiavelli.¹⁰

Two well known works which do take a more inclusive approach to antiquity illustrate very well the lack of a clear middle ground between these two extreme approaches of timelessness and obsolescence. One is Delbrück’s monumental *History of Warfare* from a century ago. Delbrück’s main point with regard to antiquity is that the comparative troop strengths claimed by ancient writers should be treated with enormous scepticism, both on grounds of logistics and because of the natural tendency of the victors to exaggerate their achievement. At Bibracte, for example, he suggests that Caesar, far from being outnumbered by 3:1 as his Commentaries claim, actually outnumbered the Helvetii by a similar ratio!¹¹ The trouble with this revisionism is that Delbrück’s arguments rely rather heavily on a retrospective application of the military wisdom of his own day. In the nineteenth century, victory did indeed tend to go to the ‘big battalions’, with even military geniuses like Napoleon or Lee being ground down in the end by superior numbers. The greater articulation of large armies through the corps system also allowed them to conduct outflanking movements across a wider front, and it was precisely such encirclements which Delbrück argued that the Persians and Seleucids would have attempted at Plataea and Magnesia had they really enjoyed anything like the numerical superiority which the sources claimed.¹² However, more recent military experience has shown how small, high quality forces such as the Israelis can indeed achieve sweeping triumphs (at least in ‘conventional’ operations) despite facing daunting numerical odds. The ‘timelessness’ of Delbrück’s logic now looks far less secure after a century of rapid technological change, and the real question must be whether the oft-claimed victories by outnumbered armies are plausible within the very different strategic context of antiquity itself.

The other modern work which casts very interesting light on our schizophrenic approach to ancient military wisdom is Handel’s *Masters of War*. Like Paret and Earle, Handel ignores the ‘obsolete’ practical ideas of Greek and Roman military theorists altogether in his attempted synthesis of ‘classical’ strategic thought, but he does say a lot about the vague ideals enunciated by Sun Tzu. Handel’s main argument is that the many apparent differences between the strategic recommendations of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz are more illusory than real, and hence that his various ‘classical’ theorists do indeed give convergent advice when properly interpreted.¹³ It would certainly be nice to have a single universal body of strategic wisdom, hence the popularity of Handel’s work with War Colleges and military forces perennially seeking to perfect a memorable and straightforward set of ‘principles of war’.¹⁴

¹⁰ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (London: Hutchinson, 1993); Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War* (New York: Free Press, 1989); Edward Mead Earle (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943); Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹¹ Hans Delbrück, *History of the Art of War*, vol.I, translated by Walter Renfroe (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975) pp.460-76.

¹² *Ibid*, pp.112-13 & 398-401.

¹³ Michael Handel, *Masters of War* (London: Frank Cass, 2nd ed., 1996) pp.17-19.

¹⁴ Zvi Lanir, ‘The “Principles of War” and Military Thinking’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 16 (1993) pp.1-17.



Sadly, Handel's arguments on this score are unconvincing. His suggestion that Sun Tzu adopts a broader approach to war than Clausewitz, and hence is more open to winning by means other than battle, sits uneasily with the fact that *On War* is a deeply political work whereas Sun Tzu writes very much from the perspective of a professional general, and barely mentions politics except to suggest that rulers should not interfere with military operations. Similarly, it is very hard to see the clear contrast between Sun Tzu's emphasis on an all-important information contest and Clausewitz' model of an inescapable 'fog of war' as stemming from Clausewitz' blinkered focus on the tactical and operational levels, as Handel alleges.¹⁵ The truth is surely that Handel has plucked these two works out of their historical contexts no less than 22 centuries apart, and has set them artificially side by side as 'timeless' founts of strategic wisdom. If we are to gain a better understanding of the many differences between them, we must compare Sun Tzu's characteristically inscrutable precepts with the much more specific points made by Greek and Roman writers of his own era, since the strategic and technological environment in which they were operating must have had far more in common with China in the period of the Warring States than 19th century Europe did with either.

Battle in Antiquity

When one compares what we know of ancient battle with the 19th century engagements which shaped both Clausewitz' and Delbrück's perspectives, several key differences emerge. The first is a much greater asymmetry between the casualties suffered by the opposing sides. In the 19th century, battles involved tremendous *mutual* attrition, because gunpowder weapons had invalidated the protection once offered by armour and shields and so allowed prolonged and very bloody firepower duels. This produced losses for the victors and vanquished of around 28,000 and 50,000 at Borodino, 80,000 and 60,000 at Leipzig, 22,000 and 32,000 at Waterloo, 13,700 and 12,400 at Antietam, 12,800 and 16,800 at Chancellorsville, 23,000 and 28,100 at Gettysburg, and 17,000 and 16,000 at Mars-la-Tour.¹⁶ In antiquity, the losers could suffer just as heavily once they fled and exposed themselves to one-sided slaughter during the pursuit, but combat itself seems to have involved remarkably few fatalities, and so the victors sometimes escaped amazingly lightly. Herodotus (VI.117) says there were 6,400 Persian and only 192 Athenian dead at Marathon, Livy (XXVII.44 & XLIV.42) claims that the Romans had only 100 men killed at Pydna compared to 20,000 Macedonians, and Caesar (*B Civ.* III.99) puts his losses at Pharsalus at 30 centurions and just 200 rankers as against 15,000 Pompeian troops (with almost all the rest being captured). Individual figures may be questionable, but the general picture across dozens of engagements is so consistent that we are forced to conclude that ancient battle was a high stakes gamble which usually left one army completely shattered and its opponents almost unscathed.

A second key difference between ancient and modern engagements is that troop numbers in antiquity were a far less important determinant of success, so much so that it was more often the *smaller* army which prevailed. Hence, we are told that 50,000 Carthaginians beat 86,000 Romans at Cannae, that 30,000 Romans overcame 70,000 Seleucids at Magnesia, and that Caesar's 23,000 troops at Pharsalus routed Pompey's force of over 54,000.¹⁷ This is again far too pervasive a phenomenon to be dismissed entirely as propagandistic exaggeration, especially since it is even recorded by sources more favourable to the vanquished, as at

¹⁵ Handel (1996) pp.146-7.

¹⁶ Ernest & Trevor Dupuy, *The Collins Encyclopaedia of Military History* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 4th ed., 1993) chs.17-18.

¹⁷ Polybius (III.113-4); Livy (XXXVII.37-40); Caesar (*B Civ.* III.84 & 88-9).



Leuctra, Cannae and Carrhae.¹⁸ The explanation seems to be partly that the more primitive command arrangements in antiquity gave larger armies little option except to pile their extra troops up in greater depth rather than using them for the outflanking movements which Delbrück expected, and partly that the more psychological nature of the combat process placed a greater premium on quality than on quantity and meant that there was less need for reserves than in the later firepower duels. Hence, most modern scholars reject Delbrück's radical scepticism and are much more willing to give some credence to the ancient figures for troop numbers and casualties, except where they become patently absurd as in Greek claims of Persian forces running into the hundreds of thousands.¹⁹

A third important difference between the strategic environment in antiquity and that in the 19th century is that it was easier for ancient armies to decline battle except on favourable terms, so that full scale engagements were rarer and depended to a greater degree on mutual consent. This is very clearly illustrated by Pericles' strategy of staying within the Long Walls and avoiding the invading Spartans during the Peloponnesian War, as well as by Fabius Cunctator's ability to shadow Hannibal through the use of rough ground and earthworks to stymie the superior Punic horse, and by the fact that it took 3 years of cautious manoeuvring during the 2nd and 3rd Macedonian Wars before the armies finally plunged into the decisive clashes at Cynoscephalae and Pydna respectively.²⁰ In Book 4, Clausewitz wrote very insightfully about how this dynamic operated in antiquity, but he felt that by his own day, the strategic context had changed significantly. He did still think that the defender enjoyed a certain advantage, but he argued that 'Today there is nothing to prevent a commander bent on a decisive battle from seeking out the enemy and attacking him'.²¹ Cities abandoned by their field army fell much more easily, so strategic withdrawal was less of an option unless one's people were committed enough to make the kind of sacrifices endured by Russia in 1812.²² This combination of battles becoming harder to avoid, mutually much bloodier and more dependent on numerical superiority by the 19th century than they had been in antiquity provides a much more credible explanation for the different strategic perspectives of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz than do Handel's flimsy assertions about different levels of analysis.

Ancient Military Theory

Ancient tactical writers including Sun Tzu were preoccupied above all with the psychological and intelligence contest between the opposing armies. This was rooted in the fact that the greatest risk for any army was being ambushed, either by being attacked while unprepared (as at Lake Trasimene) or by being drawn into an ill-considered engagement, perhaps based on misplaced confidence in one's own numerical superiority (as at Cannae or Pharsalus).²³ Sun Tzu's famous aphorism 'Know the enemy and know yourself: in a hundred battles you will never be in peril' presumably reflects the idea that a perfectly informed general would always be able to avoid engagements in which his forces would be at a disadvantage – hence the notion that 'a victorious army wins its victories before seeking battle; an army destined to defeat fights in the

¹⁸ Xenophon (*Hel.* VI.4); Livy (XXII.36 & 46-9); Plutarch (*Crass.* 20-21).

¹⁹ See the extensive discussion in my own forthcoming book *Lost Battles: Reconstructing the Great Clashes of the Ancient World* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007).

²⁰ John Lazenby, *The Peloponnesian War* (London: Routledge, 2004) and *Hannibal's War* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1978); Nicholas Hammond, *The Macedonian State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) chs.13-14.

²¹ Clausewitz (1976) pp.245-7.

²² George Nafziger, *Napoleon's Invasion of Russia* (Novato CA: Presidio, 1988).

²³ Lazenby (1978) pp.62-5 & 75-85; Goldsworthy (2006) pp.422-31.



hope of winning'.²⁴ Western writers of his time, like Frontinus, Onasander and Vegetius, gave a clearer sense of how these ideals could be pursued in practice, offering specific suggestions about such matters as avoiding ambushes, gathering intelligence on enemy capabilities, gauging the morale of one's own troops, and choosing an appropriate time and place for battle.²⁵ Vegetius, for instance, advised his readers 'Do not be fully confident if it is the recruits who want battle, for war is sweet to the inexperienced. You will know to postpone it if the experienced warriors are afraid of fighting'.²⁶ Both Vegetius and Sun Tzu advocated winning without a battle if at all possible, to avoid the inescapable element of chance in any engagement.²⁷ This pervasive caution and search for better information contrasts sharply with Clausewitz' statement that 'Given the same amount of intelligence, timidity will do a thousand times more damage in war than audacity'. He famously warned that 'We are not interested in generals who win victories without bloodshed' and that, if one focused too much on cautious and bloodless manoeuvre warfare, 'Sooner or later someone will come along with a sharp sword and hack off our arms'.²⁸ Such bold and bloodthirsty views are far more intelligible in a world where direct attack by large forces willing to accept heavy casualties as the price of victory was much more difficult to resist.

Battle in antiquity was such a high stakes affair that conflicts sometimes dragged on for decades of raiding and sieges (as in the Peloponnesian and First Punic Wars) without both sides simultaneously being prepared to risk everything on a climactic confrontation in the open field.²⁹ However, two factors offset this tendency towards an indecisive stalemate. One was the pressure on both sides to reach a resolution before they became utterly exhausted – a tension beautifully captured in Sun Tzu's paradoxical aphorism that 'Invincibility lies in the defence; the possibility of victory in the attack'.³⁰ To break the stalemate, the ancient theorists laid great stress on the offensive use of 'information warfare', through concealing one's own strength and plans and through seeking to mislead, surprise and ambush the enemy. Sun Tzu as usual focused on the generic advice that 'All warfare is based on deception. Therefore when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity'.³¹ The western theorists again gave more specific suggestions as to how this might be achieved. Onasander, for instance, advised crowding one's soldiers into a small camp to make them appear fewer and giving the impression of fear to tempt a reluctant enemy to engage, a tactic which the Romans adopted against Hannibal's brother at the Metaurus and which Caesar later used against the Gauls.³² This view of information as an asset to be exploited and manipulated contrasts sharply with Clausewitz's image of an inescapable 'fog of war', blanketing both sides in pervasive uncertainty. Clausewitz did not see deliberate deception as making much impact, and he argued that 'It would be a mistake..to regard surprise as a key element of success in war'.³³ This clear disagreement was surely rooted in part in the greater ability of superior armies in his day to force battle unilaterally and prevail, even without winning the intelligence contest.

²⁴ Sun Tzu (1963) pp.84 & 87.

²⁵ Frontinus (*Strat.* I.1-12 & II.1-6); Onasander (6, 10 & 14); Vegetius (III.6 & 9-12).

²⁶ Vegetius, *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, translated by N P Milner (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1993) p.87 (III.12).

²⁷ Vegetius (III.26); Sun Tzu (1963) pp.77-9.

²⁸ Clausewitz (1976) pp.191 & 260

²⁹ Lazenby (2004) and *The First Punic War* (London: UCL Press, 1996).

³⁰ Sun Tzu (1963) p.85.

³¹ *Ibid*, p.66.

³² Onasander (10.16-21); Livy (XXVII.43-7); Caesar (*B Gall.* V.49-51).

³³ Clausewitz (1976) p.198.



The other factor which tempted ancient armies to engage in the end despite the awful risks was morale. Repeatedly declining an enemy offer of battle could demoralise one's own troops and encourage those of the opponent, thereby shifting the all-important psychological balance between the adversaries (especially if one's own lands were being ravaged as a calculated coercive act). Hence, the Persians confronted Alexander at the Granicus despite Memnon's advice, the Romans temporarily abandoned Fabius' delaying strategy in favour of the disastrous confrontation at Cannae, and Pompey was eventually persuaded against his better judgement to give battle at Pharsalus.³⁴ The theorists laid great stress on shaping friendly and enemy morale by clever stratagems, and were very well aware of the delicate balancing act which needed to be undertaken. Frontinus had successive sections on 'how to check an unseasonable demand for battle' and 'how to arouse an army's enthusiasm for battle', and Onasander summed up the challenge very well when he wrote, 'These two misfortunes happen to armies, to become so terrified of the enemy that they are unwilling to attempt any offensive, and so bold that they are unwilling to take any precautionary measures. With regard to each the general must arrange his plans, and know when by voice and look he must make the enemy appear weak, and when more threatening and formidable'.³⁵ Clausewitz also emphasised the importance of morale far more than had his 18th century predecessors with their arcane geometrical calculations, but he saw this issue as less of a balancing act and more of an imperative to strengthen troops' resolution to face the inevitable and mutually bloody confrontations which the warfare of his own day involved.³⁶ In all of these areas, it is only when one moves beyond the artificial timelessness of Handel's approach and sets the theorists properly in their respective strategic contexts that the real explanation for their differing perspectives becomes apparent.

The Way Forward

I mentioned at the outset that classicists face a difficult challenge in maintaining the interest and relevance of their subject in the 21st century world. My argument that ancient military wisdom cannot be properly understood except in the context of its own time is a decidedly double-edged sword in this regard, since it could all too easily lead non-classicists to ignore antiquity even more than they already do. The 'short cuts' of abstracting out ideas as timeless verities or searching for coincidental resemblances between ancient and modern at least have the merit of keeping antiquity to at least some degree in the public eye. Such accidental relevance is perfectly captured in Lord's claim that 'Sun Tzu can be seen as anticipating the information-oriented strategic approach of the contemporary 'Revolution in Military Affairs'; Clausewitz seems wedded to a fundamentally outmoded view of the limits of human knowledge of the battlefield'.³⁷ However, if we content ourselves with such windfall gains, then we risk falling foul of Clausewitz' typically acute judgement that, 'Unfortunately, writers have always had a pronounced tendency to refer to events in ancient history. How much of this is due to vanity and quackery can remain unanswered; but one rarely finds any honesty of purpose, any earnest attempt to instruct or convince. Such allusions must therefore be looked upon as sheer decoration, designed to cover gaps and blemishes'.³⁸ If classical wisdom is to be more than ornamental (as a recent British education secretary described medieval history), then it must be approached seriously rather than superficially, and in a way which both engages popular interest

³⁴ Arrian (*Anab.* I.12-13); Livy (XXII.32-5); Appian (*B Civ.* II.63-9).

³⁵ Frontinus (*Strat.* I.10-11); Onasander (14.2).

³⁶ Clausewitz (1976) pp.136-7 & 184-92.

³⁷ Carnes Lord, 'A Note on Sun Tzu', *Comparative Strategy* 19 (2000) pp.304-5.

³⁸ Clausewitz (1976) p.174.



and develops skills and ideas which are of real and direct relevance to more contemporary problems.

A crying need in the modern world is for better analysis of the likely strategic dynamics of conflicts such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not enough just to base this on recent experience with other high technology military interventions – we need instead to give people practice in analysing the widest possible range of previous conflicts if we are to avoid the kind of blinkered thinking which led to such disastrous mishandling of the Iraqi occupation. That is why the very different strategic context of antiquity is actually an asset rather than a liability, since it gives us a wider menu of historical case studies on which to hone our skills of analysing from first principles the strategic dynamics of each individual case. Conflicts are incredibly complex phenomena, and the balance of variables can shift markedly depending on the particular circumstances involved. This was well illustrated by two attempted island invasions in 1941-42, in both of which the defenders had weaker forces but enjoyed massive intelligence advantages. In one case (Crete) the island was overwhelmed, but in the other (Midway) the defenders pulled off a stunning victory against the odds.³⁹ To say that Crete fits better with Clausewitz' model of intelligence and Midway more with Sun Tzu's ideas is mere coincidental hindsight, but if we get used to analysing the strategic context as I have done in this paper to see *why* the theorists took such different views in the first place, then we will be better placed to apply those same techniques to the modern conflicts themselves to explore the dynamic reasons for the very different outcomes in each case.

By happy coincidence, such modelling of past conflicts is a significant reason for the continued popular interest in ancient warfare. I have always decried the computer game *Rome: Total War* and its television spin-off *Time Commanders* for their severe distortion of the realities of ancient battle in favour of the Hollywood image of a few minutes of mutual carnage, but I cannot deny the utility of these games in inspiring students to come and study the subject more seriously.⁴⁰ I myself now run an MA option in which students use related but more academically sound simulation techniques to model an historical conflict of their choice, based on proper research and with a focus on developing exactly the skills of tactical and strategic analysis which I just identified as being so important in the modern world. This year, one student chose to model the first few years of Hannibal's campaigns, thereby gaining great insights into the dynamics of the Fabian strategy and the contrary pressures which led to Cannae. Other students modelled Crete, Midway and the 2003 'Thunder Run' into Baghdad on exactly the same basis, showing the universal applicability of this analytical technique.⁴¹ My own forthcoming book uses similar comparative dynamic modelling to advance our understanding of ancient battles by critically reviewing the diverse and unsystematic reconstructions within the existing scholarship.⁴² Such techniques are controversial and easily misunderstood, especially given the linkage with popular enthusiasm, but as I said at the outset, it would be tragic for classicists to retreat into an intellectual ghetto, divorced from the needs and interests of the modern world. The sheer

³⁹ John Keegan, *Intelligence in War* (London: Hutchinson, 2003) chs.5-6; Antony Beevor, *Crete* (London: John Murray, 1991); Jonathan Parshall & Anthony Tully, *Shattered Sword* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005).

⁴⁰ Creative Assembly, *Rome: Total War*, PC software (Slough: Activision, 2004); Peter Harrison, *Time Commanders* (London: Virgin Books, 2004).

⁴¹ The Crete and Midway simulations, along with many others, may be downloaded from the course website at <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/wsg/consim.html>. The Second Punic War simulation, by Garrett Mills, is due to be published by the Society of Ancients in early 2008.

⁴² Sabin, *Lost Battles* (2007).



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reservoir of human experience recorded by Thucydides, Polybius, Caesar, Ammianus and the rest is far too valuable to allow that to occur. There are no 'short cuts' to make the classical legacy in warfare directly relevant to the modern day, and it should always be assessed in its own unique context, but if it is integrated into the whole sweep of military history, it offers an invaluable widening of our range of experience, and so makes us better equipped to respond appropriately to the security challenges of the future.



Vegetius and the Middle Ages

Dr David Whetham, JSCSC

Editor's Note

David Whetham's paper concerned the work Epitoma Rei Militaris (Epitome of Military Science) by Flavius Vegetius Renatus. The work was one of the most widely known Ancient texts in the Middle ages being read by a variety of individuals from Kings and military leaders to churchmen and teachers. During questions David agreed that the edition published by the University of Liverpool was among the best.

Foreign editions included Knyghthode and Bataile in English and a French edition The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyalrye by Christine de Pisan.

At the outset David emphasised his agreement with Philip Sabin's view that context was essential in discussing ancient and medieval texts.

Vegetius was thought to be a high ranking civil servant who wrote his book in around 384-389 but it was extensively studied and published in updated editions a thousand years later. He was concerned to establish the purpose for which it was originally written and contrast this with how medieval authors and readers used it.

It was written in the late 4th century at a time when Roman fortunes were in decline. It was a collection of writings, both abstract and practical which sought to draw attention to the old Roman military virtues which had been successful in the past. One of the difficulties, no doubt as much for its original readers as for later scholars, was that Vegetius drew examples from the whole of Roman history from Republic to Empire so that the picture of his ideal army was somewhat confusing.

The book emphasised that the successes of the past had been built on selection of the right recruits and then a careful and rigorous training. Proper training and practice had brought victory.

But clearly there was no one around in 389 who could teach these old theories and so the work is more of a polemic than a history or a military manual. Self-evidently it was not particularly influential at the time that it was written but it was very influential in the Middle Ages. Book III contains the famous aphorism "*Let him who desires peace prepare for war*" and references to it are found in the works of such diverse people as Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede and Thomas Aquinas. It appears that it was more popular than Livy or Caesar and several medieval leaders were known to possess full copies. There are indications that portable versions were produced for use on campaign.

Vegetius had an obvious appeal to military leaders but it was also used by ecclesiastics looking for inspiration for sermons. Tales of heroism and self-sacrifice could be contrasted with behaviours of greed or lust to make a moral point.

The wisdom of antiquity was sought after; it seemed authoritative. The Romans had conquered the world. 14th century leaders wanted to do it too.



David looked at Book III in some detail as it concerned the conduct of war. It featured headings for Surprise, Ambush, Raids and Deception amongst others. Our image of chivalric warfare is that such stratagems were regarded as underhand. In fact they were seen as very important. In a warfare of individuals it was important to take advantage of the unexpected, to try and gain an edge although not always to the extent of dyeing your rigging and sails blue when at sea.

Surprise attacks on camps and columns of march were seen as very important as was the whole business of intelligence, scouting and deception.

Medieval translations were, however, not just straightforward translations of the 4th century Latin. They were updated and annotated with contemporary remarks. For example, the edition for Lord Berkeley contains references to plate armour and guns.

“The Book of Fayttes of Armes and of Chyalrye” was a textbook made by Christine de Pisan in 1408-09, possibly for the education of the future King of France. She drew on Vegetius a good deal, emphasising the importance of intelligence and spies both to gather intelligence about and to deceive the enemy. The advantages of attacking by ambush or other clear advantage was stressed and was particularly relevant when one’s forces were outnumbered or otherwise disadvantaged.

The idea that chivalry is synonymous with a fair fight is clearly too simple. Chivalric warfare was a feud in which the legal positions of each side were of great significance. It was important to demonstrate the rightness of one’s cause to the outside world but also to have the outcome of an engagement recognised by the other side. Certain rules did have to be followed or this would not be the case. This was to be contrasted to the formal declaration of a state of war where armies were drawn up on a battlefield and the affairs of the contestants were placed in the hands of God. This was no longer war, but rather the suspension of it for arbitration by trial by battle before God. Therefore different rules applied.

Thus when Vegetius recommends the importance of withdrawals from the field if the situation is unfavourable Christine misquotes him by suggesting that retreating at night is shameful as it indicated a loss of confidence in the cause. The cause was, of course, something that Vegetius had no doubts about because Rome had already established the justice of its cause before embarking on the war in the first place.

David concluded with a look at Knyghthode and Bataile which was an English version of Vegetius in the style of a poem. Again, this emphasised that one should not trust any proclamations made by the enemy and stressed the importance of scouting and interrogation. It suggested that new recruits should be given an easy battle to start with, such as an ambush as it would help their confidence but that any *ruse de guerre* should be legitimate otherwise it might be counterproductive to the cause. It also discussed the importance of the tourney as a method of training.

In summary, Roman warfare was about imposing the justice of the Roman state, medieval warfare about enforcing that of an individual. Vegetius was not just popular for moral reasons but because of the practical advice he offered in a warfare of individual warriors, scouting,



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ambushes and getting an edge as long as this was done in the correct way. Above all, it was necessary to wage war legitimately so as not to harm your cause.

Editor adds:

David told me afterwards that he will be exploring these ideas further in a book due out next year. I certainly look forward to reading it and will publish further details as I receive them.



Man, Soldier, Tyrant – The Perception of Caesar from Machiavelli to Napoleon III

By Dr Dorit Wintjes, University of Würzburg

I. Introduction

Looking back to Caesar, the great statesman and, as Fuller famously put it, the "amateur soldier of genius",⁴³ from the perspective of another great statesman and general, Napoleon, a slightly ambiguous picture emerges. On the one hand there is Napoleon's most famous comment: "Read again and again the campaigns of Hannibal, Caesar, Gustavus Adolphus, Turenne, Eugene, and Frederick. Model yourself upon them. This is the only means of becoming a great captain, and of acquiring the secret of the art of war."⁴⁴ On the other hand, however, there is the *Précis des guerres de Jules César*, a remarkably detailed commentary on Caesar's campaigns, written by Napoleon after he had been exiled to St. Helena and sadly almost unknown among classicists nowadays. Here, his judgement on Caesar isn't exactly positive, in fact, for most parts of Caesar's campaigns he notes a certain lack of strategic intelligence and preparation.⁴⁵ Reading the *Précis* one cannot but wonder whether there might be more of the amateur than the genius in Caesar the soldier.

The main aim of this paper is to sketch the role Caesar played in military theory from the early 16th century onwards to the end of the 19th century and thus to explain how at the beginning of the 19th century Napoleon could at the same time condemn nearly every military decision Caesar made and yet commend him as a role model for anyone aspiring to become a "great commander". For that purpose it is impracticable to strictly separate Caesar's role from that of ancient military theory in general, so in some cases I have to address the latter as well. The main argument will be that interest into Caesar shifted during the course of the 17th and 18th century from learning practical lessons to gaining insights into what was thought to be the principles of war and into military leadership in general.

II. Machiavelli and the Oranians

Already in medieval times as well as at the beginning of the Renaissance, ancient military writers found interested readers in Western Europe; in most cases, however, this interest was of a rather antiquarian nature. It was only at the beginning of the 16th century that ancient military thinking gained widespread attention, not the least because it was at that time that contemporary warfare finally again approached a level of complexity comparable to antiquity. The ground for a renewed and deepened interest into ancient military matters was by that time already well-prepared. Editions had been made by most of the important ancient authors; to give just a few examples, the *editio princeps* of Caesar had been prepared in 1469 by Giovanni Andrea de Bussi, while Aelianus' *taktika* was first published in a Latin translation by Theodorus Gazes in 1487, and roughly a century later in 1589 Isaac Casaubon edited Polyænus for the first time.⁴⁶ General studies on ancient military history were being published as well; here the works of Justus Lipsius which appeared at the end of the 16th

⁴³ J. F. C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar. Man, Soldier, Tyrant*, London 1965, 315.

⁴⁴ J. Dumaine, *Maximes de Guerres et Pensées de Napoléon Ier*, Paris 1863, 45: "Lisez, relisez les campagnes d'Alexandre, Annibal, César, Gustave, Turenne, Eugène et de Frédéric; modelez-vous sur eux: voilà le seul moyen de devenir grand capitaine, et de surprendre les secrets de l'art de la guerre"; cf. also *ibid.* 44.

⁴⁵ Napoleon Bonaparte, *Précis des guerres de Jules César*, Paris 1869, 21.

⁴⁶ J. E. Sandys, *A History of Classical Scholarship Vol. 2*, Cambridge 1908, 103-5.



century were probably the most influential ones.⁴⁷ Throughout the whole century matters of ancient history in general and of ancient military history in particular were in constant discussion among the well educated classes in Western Europe.

One of the first important attempts at applying lessons taken from ancient military history to an army of the 16th century was made by Niccolò Machiavelli in his 1520 study *L'arte della guerra*.⁴⁸ In many ways, the *arte* is a rather peculiar work in which Machiavelli describes a model army that is put to the test of various theoretical combat situations. For some reasons Machiavelli does not think very highly of cavalry - in his eyes, horses lack the mobility of infantrymen, do not keep formation as well as infantrymen do and can be easily warded off by infantrymen that are properly trained and equipped. He argues that "it has been seen that a small group of infantry can be very secure from, and even actually insuperable to, the cavalry".⁴⁹ Consequently, Machiavelli's model army almost exclusively relies on infantrymen, and these he wants to be organised on the lines of the Roman legion right down to giving the various types of infantrymen traditional Latin names.

Setting aside the question whether the average infantryman of Macchiavelli's time would really have agreed to his statement on the insuperability of even small groups of infantrymen and concentrating instead on the question of how Machiavelli used his ancient sources, one would expect him to mention Caesar several times - after all, he addressed in his work both the practical aspects of setting up an army and the political implications of such an undertaking.

And so he indeed does. His main interest in Caesar, however, is not centred on what the latter used his forces for, but on how he used them - in the context of the *arte* it is not the 'principe' Caesar that deserves attention, but the 'capitano'. Machiavelli is looking for tactics or ruses that can be used in conjunction with his model army, and in that he follows the tradition of ancient military writers in compiling *strategemata*.

To give just a few examples, he mentions how Caesar crossed the Elaver by secretly leaving a small force behind to build a bridge while drawing the attention of Vercingetorix to his main force and away from the site of the bridge.⁵⁰ Another, more general example is the use of temporary fieldworks, which is advocated by Machiavelli and illustrated with Caesar's attempt to lift the siege of Bibrax, during which he at one point covered the flanks of his army with extensive fortifications.⁵¹ Caesar can also offer an example supporting Machiavelli's disinclination for including cavalry into his model army, as on one occasion during the campaign against the Helvetii he has his cavalrymen fighting dismounted to prevent them from fleeing the battlefield.⁵² On a more, one is inclined to say, strategic level, Machiavelli contrasts Caesar favourably to Hannibal, as the former always pursued a routed enemy, whereas Hannibal - or so Machiavelli thought - did not follow up his initial successes, thereby letting the opportunity to deal a decisive blow to the Romans pass.⁵³ So clearly for

⁴⁷ Lipsius' *De militia Romana libri quinque* on the Roman Military was published in 1595, the *Poliorketikon sive de machinis, tormentis, telis libri quinque* on ancient artillery and siegecraft in the following year; on the general importance of Justus Lipsius see G. Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State*. Cambridge 1982; on the influence he exerted on a number of 17th century military theory, especially on Raimondo Montecuccoli, cf. A. Gat, *A History of Military Thought. From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, Oxford 2001, 18sq.

⁴⁸ On the general importance of Machiavelli's study cf. *ibid.*, 3-11.

⁴⁹ N. Machiavelli, *L'arte della guerra*, Florenz 1521, 93: "Tale che si è visto per le antiche e per le moderne esperienze un nodo di fanti essere securissimo, anzi insuperabile da' cavagli."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 208.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 161sq.

⁵² *Ibid.* 93sq.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 175.



Machiavelli Caesar was valuable not the least so because his works yielded lessons that could be put into practice on a contemporary battlefield.

Caesar and ancient military theory in general did not remain confined to the desks of theoreticians for long. Instead, not even a century later, ancient military thinking was not merely theoretically applied to contemporary warfare, but practically transferred to the battlefield in what was one of the most important single acts of reform of early modern warfare. The Oranian army reform, by which Maurice of Orange-Nassau and his cousin William planned to get a qualitative edge over their Spanish enemies, was put into effect from 1595 onwards. This reorganisation centred on the introduction of newly organised army units, new tactical concepts, a new recruiting system, aimed at reducing the number of mercenaries and centrally organised training for all soldiers, something that was almost completely unknown in Europe at that time.⁵⁴ All these innovations stemmed from a thorough analysis of several ancient military writers, and as a result the 'new' Oranian army was in fact to some extent a very old one as it was based on ancient models.

Taking a very brief look behind the scenes of this reform, it should come as no surprise that the Oranians turned to ancient sources for building, equipping and training their armies. Almost all literature on military theory and military practice available to them at the time was either of ancient or of early Byzantine origin, and the Oranians, as Machiavelli had already done, believed in sharing important tactical problems with their ancient counterparts. While the similarities - real as well as perceived ones - between ancient and 16th century warfare were indeed a key factor in adopting ancient armies as role models, the general intellectual background against which the army reform took place was of equal importance. Both Maurice and William had enjoyed a thorough humanistic education;⁵⁵ both took great interest in antiquity in general and in ancient military history in particular. In the catalogue of Maurice's library we find the works of Caesar, Aelianus and others taking a prominent place,⁵⁶ whereas William not only wrote a study on Cannae but also thought a sound knowledge of the Latin language to be a prerequisite for anyone aspiring to become a general, if only for the simple reason that it enabled one to read the ancient sources.⁵⁷

Turning equally briefly to what the Oranians actually made use of, Aelianus and Leo VI unsurprisingly take a prominent place as far as unit organisation and tactical manoeuvring were concerned.⁵⁸ For these matters, Caesar's commentaries were in most cases not as useful; they could, however, provide lessons of a more general nature instead, as for example on the importance of topography during military action and on the importance of sound logistics.⁵⁹ The latter is noteworthy insofar as Caesar is nowadays often assumed to have never really

⁵⁴ Still a good introduction into the Oranian army reform is W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier und die Antike*, Osnabrück 1987), which was originally published in 1941; for more recent studies see the bibliographical notes in H. L. Zwitter, "The Eighty Years War", Van der Hoeven, M. (ed.). *Exercise of Arms. Warfare in the Netherlands 1568-1648*, Leiden 1998, 33-55, 54sq.

⁵⁵ It has to be noted, however, that both William and Maurice had little knowledge of Greek; William had Polybius translated for him into Latin; see L. Plathner, *Graf Johann von Nassau und die erste Kriegsschule*. diss. phil. Berlin 1913, 36.

⁵⁶ Together with other editions of ancient authors the 1575 edition of Caesar's commentaries used by Maurice has survived; cf. W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier. Das Kriegsbuch des Grafen Johannes von Nassau-Siegen*, Wiesbaden 1973, 58 n. 45.

⁵⁷ W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier und die Antike*, Osnabrück 1987, 15-17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 30-119 and 302-307.

⁵⁹ Cf. for example W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier. Das Kriegsbuch des Grafen Johannes von Nassau-Siegen*, Wiesbaden 1973, 74.



bothered about organising a proper logistical preparation.⁶⁰ It should be said, however, that this judgement on Caesar's campaigns not only ignores his own testimony - he constantly mentions his concerns about his corn supply - but also the challenges he faced which in the case of his British expeditions for example were quite extraordinary. Perhaps the Oranians were more measured in their judgement on Caesar than we are nowadays.

Other aspects that found great interest were those that could be described as combat engineering. The *Kriegsbuch* of John of Nassau-Siegen,⁶¹ itself an important source for the Oranian army reform, mentions Caesar several times, most notably in the context of bridging river obstacles and military fieldworks, on which it put a particular stress.⁶² Indeed, reading the *Kriegsbuch* one cannot help but think it has actually been written by an army engineer - it suggests that "everyone who calls fieldworks a cowardly pastime should learn how the Romans artfully conquered the world through it".⁶³

Now, if one compares the more theoretical approach of Machiavelli's *L'arte della guerra* with the more practical one of the Oranians, two observations can be made: On the one hand it is obvious that Caesar's Renaissance readers turned to his works mainly in order to get direct advice for tactical and organisational problems, as they did in the case of other ancient military writers. Although there can be little doubt that Caesar was also admired by his readers for his military and political leadership abilities, these aspects were not in the focus of their attention - the role model was not the man, but the army. It is only in a small passage of Machiavelli's *principe* that Napoleon's famous comment quoted above is already hinted at: "But to exercise the intellect the prince should ... do as an illustrious man did, who took as an example one who had been praised and famous before him, and whose achievements and deeds he always kept in his mind, as it is said Alexander the Great imitated Achilles, Caesar Alexander, Scipio Cyrus".⁶⁴ On the other hand Caesar's works could not easily be transformed into a book of military regulations. Instead they had to be mined for useful pieces of information; therefore, while he was still among the ancient military writers that were read with great interest at the time, his works did not have the same importance as for example the *taktika* of Aelianus.

III. Montecuccoli to Clausewitz

The second half of the 17th century saw important changes in warfare across Europe, and with these changes soon most of the similarities to ancient warfare were gone. With these similarities the main reason Renaissance theorists had turned to ancient military writers in the first place went as well.

⁶⁰ As an example for Caesar's lack of concern about his supplies the expeditions to Britain and particularly Caes. Gall. 4, 29 is often cited (cf. eg J. F. C. Fuller, *Julius Caesar. Man, Soldier, Tyrant*, London 1965, 316, who calls the British expeditions "amateurish in the extreme"), where, after the ships that brought the invasion force to Britain are lost in a shipwreck, Caesar's troops suddenly are in a very precarious situation, as no replacement transports are available and the Roman line of supply is thus cut; it is however, at least open to debate whether Caesar could really have been expected to cater for such an eventuality.

⁶¹ John was a grandson of William von Orange; cf. W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier und die Antike*, Osnabrück 1987, 2sq.

⁶² Cf. W. Hahlweg, *Die Heeresreform der Oranier. Das Kriegsbuch des Grafen Johannes von Nassau-Siegen*, Wiesbaden 1973, 57-59 on bridging operations in Gaul and *ibid.* 69 on the siege of Alesia.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 69.

⁶⁴ N. Macchiavelli, *Il Principe*, Turin 1961, 73sq.: "Ma, quanto allo esercizio della mente, debbe el principe ... e sopra tutto fare come ha fatto per l'adrieto qualche uomo eccellente, che ha preso ad imitare se alcuno innanzi a lui è stato laudato e gloriato, e di quello ha tenuto sempre e' gesti et azioni appresso di sé: come si dice che Alessandro Magno imitava Achille, Cesare Alessandro, Scipione Ciro".



At the same time, however, interest into the scientific study of warfare rose. War began to be seen as a science that had underlying principles in much the same way as mathematics was ruled by axioms. Military theorists considered finding and describing these general rules of war to be their main aim before turning to the more practical - and mundane - matters of unit organisation, equipment and tactics. And as the science of war was believed to be principally unchanged throughout history, these principles of war were thought to be unaffected by any changes in military technology.

The first example worthy of attention here is Raimondo Montecuccoli, who was probably the most influential military theorist of the 17th century.⁶⁵ In his famous studies *Del Arte Militare* and *Della guerra col Turco in Ungheria* he held the position that the invention of firearms and artillery notwithstanding, the fundamental principles of war remained unchanged from antiquity.⁶⁶ In doing so, he is commonly assumed to have taken recourse to ancient military history for these very principles, but a closer look at his *Del Arte Militare* shows that he did not entirely give up the idea of taking factual advice from the ancients and the Romans in particular whom he termed the "grand masters of military art".⁶⁷

Now, although Montecuccoli's approach to military theory undeniably produced results that did not really live up to their expectations - after all, his studies were essentially confined to analysing the wars of the second half of the 17th century and his own campaigns against the Turks and Turenne in particular - it nevertheless kept alive a general awareness of the importance of ancient military writers. And while military theorists began to lose interest in those ancient works that were pure handbooks on training, tactics or equipment, their attention began to shift from learning practical lessons to finding general principles, and focussed on those authors who offered a more general description of war. As a consequence, ancient historians generally gained in popularity. Evidently, Caesar with his commentaries counted among these authors as the most eminent representative of one important type of Roman historiography. Moreover, he was also the only really prominent ancient general whose writings survived, so the place he occupied had to be quite a prominent one.

The middle of the following century then saw a sharp increase in the number of publications on military theory, and ancient military history was studied with great interest by a number of writers. Jean Charles, Chevalier de Folard produced a commentary on Polybius that was explicitly aimed at officers.⁶⁸ He advocated the use of massed formations and the employment of shock tactics, something that is generally thought to stem at least in part from his analysis of Polybius' account.

Bearing this in mind it is interesting to note that Frederick the Great, who was arguably among the more gifted tacticians of his time, although he provided an *Avant-Propos* to Folard's work, did not think that the knowledge of Caesar had any great value for a professional soldier. He did - at least partly - subscribe to the idea that war was a science with underlying general principles, and accordingly praised Maurice of Orange in his *Avant-Propos* for recovering the art of war that had been neglected for centuries.⁶⁹ However, he also claimed that from Caesar's cavalry dispositions at Pharsalus, not much could be learned.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ On Raimondo Montecuccoli cf. A. Gat, *A History of Military Thought. From the Enlightenment to the Cold War*, Oxford 2001, 15-26.

⁶⁶ R. Montecuccoli, *Memoires des Montecuccoli, Generalissime des Troupes de l'Empereur*, Amsterdam 1752, 10sq.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 120: "grand maitres dans l'art militaire".

⁶⁸ The full title of the 1761 edition of his work is "L'Esprit du Chevalier Folard tiré de ses Commentaires sur l'Histoire de Polybe, pour l'Usage d'un Officier".

⁶⁹ J. D. E. Preuss, *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand* voll. 28-30. Berlin 1856, vol. 28, 101.



Now, while the cavalry battle was instrumental in deciding the overall outcome of Pharsalus, Caesar's success had indeed to be attributed to his inventive use of his lightly armed foot soldiers and to the rather questionable leadership on the side of his opponent rather than to a particular cunning way of using his cavalry;⁷¹ so one would probably agree with Frederick's observation here. His judgement on Caesar's much-maligned British campaigns on the other hand, even though it is still echoed today, is rather questionable.

In any case, however, Frederick's remarks clearly show that the concept of adopting lessons directly from ancient authors like Caesar was far from dead. Indeed, Caesar seemed largely unusable to Frederick, because, due to the major differences between ancient and contemporary matters, little of any value could be directly adopted from him. The one passage where he mentions Caesar in his *Principes Généraux de la Guerre* only underlines this 'practical' approach to Caesar's works and ancient military theory in general - it is in the context of bridging a river that Caesar's campaign in Gaul is mentioned.⁷² Whereas Frederick was aware of the fact that historical change had outrun, so to say, ancient military theory,⁷³ this view was far from popular among 18th century military theorists.

In fact, the middle of the century saw an increase in the number of publications on military theory, and ancient military history was studied with great interest by a number of writers particularly in France. To give just a few examples, Charles Guischart, who had served as a captain in a Dutch regiment, published extensively on ancient military history. The 1758 edition of his *Mémoires militaires* not only included a detailed analysis of Polybius as well as a translation of Arrian's *taktika*, but also a detailed commentary on Caesar's campaign in Africa running over almost three times as many pages as the *Bellum Africum* itself.⁷⁴ As with Montecuccoli, one cannot help but get the impression that Guischart thought Caesar and the ancients to be quite useful even beyond the question of the principles of warfare.

Quite similar to Guischart, Paul Gideon Joly de Maizeroy, who introduced the distinction of tactics and strategy into military theory, also was an eminent scholar of ancient military history. And like Guischart, he believed the principles of war to be unchanged by technical developments, therefore making ancient military history valuable to the contemporary military theorist - for him, the invention of gunpowder and all the paraphernalia of modern warfare notwithstanding, the art of directing the great operations was still the same.⁷⁵ Moreover, he also tried to look in detail at the *minutiae* of ancient warfare and their relevance for the contemporary battlefield, analysing the Byzantine military classics in particular; in 1770 he published the first French translation of Leo VI *taktika*, and the term "strategy" he first used in his 1777 *Theorie de la Guerre* he borrowed from the Byzantine emperor Maurice, whose *strategikon* was another one of the Byzantine classics already mentioned.

A little earlier, Jacques-Francois de Chastenet, Marquis de Puysegur had claimed in his *Art de la guerre par principes et par règles* - published posthumously in 1748 - that

⁷⁰ Ibid. 101: "un général de nos jours ne pourroit se servir que de la disposition de sa cavalerie à la journée de Pharsale".

⁷¹ At Pharsalus, Pompey's cavalry was driven off the field by legionary cohorts Caesar had held in reserve; seeing his flank exposed, Pompey despaired and ordered defensive measures to be undertaken, instead of trying to use the numerical superiority of his troops aggressively, which might still have turned the battle.

⁷² J. D. E. Preuss, *Oeuvres de Frédéric le Grand* voll. 28-30. Berlin 1856, vol. 28, 61.

⁷³ Frederick begins the *Principes* stating that ancient military theory, for which he takes Vegetius as a representative, has lost its usefulness (Ibid. 3).

⁷⁴ C. Guischart, *Mémoires Militaires sur les Grecs et les Romains* vol. 2, Paris 1758, 157-257.

⁷⁵ Paul Gideon Joly de Maizeroy, *Theorie de la Guerre*, Lausanne 1777, xxiiisq.



historical change had no influence on the fundamental rules of war. Even though popular opinion might have it that the introduction of firearms had made ancient military theory irrelevant, there was in fact no greater mistake to be made.⁷⁶ It was the mastery of the principles of war, unchanged throughout history, that had brought success to the great commanders, be they ancient or modern.⁷⁷ Accordingly, he began the first part of his *Art* at the very beginning of ancient literature - discussing Homers Iliad, and proceeded from then onwards to comment on Herodotus, Xenophon, Polybius, Vegetius and a host of other classical authors.⁷⁸ In the second part of the *Art* - where he looked in greater detail at selected campaigns - he then devoted a whole chapter in it to a comparison of Caesar's Spanish campaigns and that of Turenne in 1652 and 1653.⁷⁹

Although ancient military theory was thus still deemed to have a practical value in the 18th century by a significant number of theorists, the time for taking practical lessons from it seemed finally to have come to an end by the end of the century. This is perhaps best exemplified with Karl von Clausewitz, who found himself to be quite in line with Prussia's enlightened monarch with a devastating judgement on the military history of antiquity - to him, of all military history that of antiquity was the least useful.⁸⁰

Looking back from Clausewitz to the 16th century two lines of development are clearly visible. On the one hand there was what could be called a 'practical' approach to ancient military theory - lessons from it, Machiavelli, the Oranians and to a certain extent de Folard had thought, could be applied to modern warfare, as there had been little significant changes in warfare from ancient times. And while Frederick and Clausewitz discounted ancient military history as unusable, it was precisely because of this same 'practical' approach to it.

On the other hand, with Montecuccoli a distinctly different approach can be discerned, which assumed the existence of general principles of war that were unchallenged by any historical change. In order to understand these, one had not to look at the technicalities of war, but at those who had through their outstanding successes shown their mastery of these general principles - the great generals of military history. Herein lay the key to Caesar's continued relevance to military theorists. And while Alexander may have been more successful, and Hannibal probably had a better understanding of tactics, only Caesar offered the possibility to study not only his campaigns, but also his very own reflections on them through his commentaries.

IV. The Impact of Industrialisation

As the 19th century went on the distance between ancient and contemporary warfare was further increased dramatically. Around the middle of the century industrialization brought about the greatest changes in the fields of tactics, strategic planning and military technology since the introduction of firearms in European armies - perhaps best epitomized by Hilaire Belloc's famous couplet "*whatever happens, we have got / the Maxim gun and they have not*". In such a context, ancient military theory clearly had lost any practical value.

⁷⁶ Jacques-Francois de Chastenet, *Art de la Guerre*, Paris 1748, 3: "Mais afin qu'on lise avec confiance les remarques que je fais sur les auteurs Grecs et Latins, je voudrois détruire une opinion vulgaire, qui est de croire que depuis l'usage des armes à feu la guerre se fait d'une façon bien différente de celle qui étoit en pratique auparavant, et qu'ainsi tout ce qu'on peut lire sur la guerre chez les anciens n'est plus en usage".

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 2.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 4-34.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 179-198.

⁸⁰ K. v. Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Berlin/Leipzig 1917, 125.



Already in the first half of the century, Napoleon had noted in his *Précis des guerres de Jules César* that ancient warfare was completely different to contemporary warfare.⁸¹ As already mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in the *Précis* Napoleon puts all of Caesar's major military decisions under close scrutiny, often with very negative results. The expeditions to Britain do not fare well at all; as to Frederick they appeared ill-prepared to Napoleon as well, undertaken with insufficient forces, and - as Caesar didn't bother to leave garrisons behind - eventually ineffective.⁸²

Now, setting again aside the question whether Caesar's performance in 55 and 54 BC was really that abysmal, Napoleon's comments are particularly interesting where he compares Caesar's actions or ancient military matters in general to those of his own time. And it is in his description of Roman fieldworks, which he considers to be one of the Roman army's most important capabilities, that he clearly illustrates the difference between ancient and contemporary warfare. Whereas in an age when soldiers were armed with swords and pikes, for a Roman legion building a camp at the end of each day provided security, with the introduction of firearms and particularly artillery such a camp would invariably turn into a deathtrap, as the defenders would have to spread their fire, while the attackers could concentrate it on one target. And while a Roman legion could hold a camp even against an enemy vastly superior in numbers, a modern force would not only succumb to the artillery of an enemy superior in numbers, but would even lose against an enemy of similar size, as the latter could disperse his artillery. Moreover, the Roman commander could place his camp without paying too much attention to the landscape, for example in a valley between two hills. For the contemporary commander, however, topography was the key to victory; pointedly, Napoleon states that entrenching a Roman legion did not require a military genius, whereas finding the most suitable positions for one's forces on a modern battlefield where the hallmark of a modern military genius.⁸³

This passage, though it is not directly related to Caesar, but to Roman warfare in general, is remarkable in a number of ways. First of all it demonstrates Napoleon's clear understanding of the capabilities of artillery and rifle-armed infantry, which surpassed that of many 19th century theorists. Furthermore it not only stresses the difference between ancient and contemporary warfare, but also very clearly states the advantages of modern warfare - Napoleon describes how a modern army would rout an encamped Roman legion with ease without even trying to storm or breach the walls, simply by using gunfire. It is also clear that to Napoleon commanding a modern army was much more demanding than commanding a Roman legion.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Napoleon's remarks, however, is only indirectly stated: due to the fundamental differences between ancient and modern military matters, ancient military theory is not merely difficult - or next to impossible - to adopt on a modern battlefield. The lessons it can offer can actually be decidedly wrong, at least in certain situations - whereas troop concentration is desirable on an ancient battlefield, it could be potentially disastrous on a modern one.

So, as far as the value of ancient military history in general as well as Caesar in particular is concerned, the *Précis* could well be regarded as closing the case - after all, one of the greatest military leaders of the time had, after a detailed analysis of Caesar's campaigns in Gaul, come to the conclusion that Caesar's campaigns were fault-ridden and that ancient warfare was immeasurably inferior to modern warfare.

⁸¹ Napoleon Bonaparte, *Précis des guerres de Jules César*, Paris 1869, 33.

⁸² *Ibid.* 28 and 32sq.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 34-38.



V. Caesar at military academies

Yet only about 100 years later officers in most European armies had read the works of Caesar and analysed his campaigns as ancient military history had become part of their officer's training. Indeed, right at the end of the 19th century the Austrian imperial high command even went so far as to provide substantial support, both financial and organisational, for a research project on ancient military history; this resulted in the groundbreaking studies of Johannes Kromeyer, a well-known classicist and ancient historian, and Georg Veith, who was an active Austrian army colonel at the time.⁸⁴

There were two quite different reasons for this turn of events. The first one has to do with the concept of understanding the general principles of war. Montecuccoli's view - that these principles were unaffected by the differences in warfare between antiquity and the 17th century - could just as well be applied to the 19th century. And was it not the great Napoleon himself, who, despite his criticism expressed in his *Précis*, nevertheless thought that there was ample reason to study Caesar, not for any tactical problems, but for his decision making processes, for his character and for his leadership abilities? Studying the great commanders of military history was, according to his famous comment, "the only means of becoming a great captain, and of acquiring the secret of the art of war."⁸⁵ Napoleon saw in Caesar one of the great commanders of military history, who could not only provide insight into the general nature of war, but also serve as a role model for future military leaders. It was the man who deserved attention, not the tactics he applied or the way his troops were equipped; his principles of military leadership were unaffected by historical change and could be applied to a formation of pikemen as well as a line of grenadiers.

This shift in attention from Caesar the general to Caesar the military leader had the important effect of securing interest into him beyond any considerations of actual usefulness. However, it also resulted in a certain diffusion, so to speak, of military and political aspects, as in studying Caesar's leadership it is simply not possible to strictly separate them. Moreover, a study of Caesar's campaigns that encompassed both military and political aspects could also serve political ends, something that was not possible - or at least not as easy - with a purely military analysis of the campaigns.

Here, Louis Napoleon's *Histoire de Jules Cesar* provides a fitting example and makes a remarkable comparison to the *Précis* of his famous uncle. Louis Napoleon analysed Caesar's campaigns in a broadly similar way, paying, however, more attention to factual detail. On the other hand, while the *Précis* is just a military commentary on the campaigns of Caesar in Gaul, the *Histoire* is not only, as the title obviously suggests, much broader in scope.⁸⁶ It also serves a specific purpose that sometimes escapes the attention of modern interpreters, which is interesting because the purpose of the *Histoire* is stated boldly and clearly in its preface - the aim of Louis Napoleon's work is to prove that providence sometimes brings up great individuals like Caesar, Charlemagne and Napoleon, so that these individuals can lead their

⁸⁴ Kromeyer/Veith (1903), 5; on Johannes Kromeyer (1859-1934) and Georg Veith (1875-1925) see E. v. Nischer, "Georg Veith", *Biographisches Jahrbuch für Altertumskunde* 46, 1926, 77-96 and O. Schulz, "Johannes Kromayer", *Biographisches Jahrbuch für Altertumskunde* 62, 1936, 49-79.

⁸⁵ J. Dumaine, *Maximes de Guerres et Pensées de Napoléon Ier*, Paris 1863, 45.

⁸⁶ The *Histoire* spans the time from Caesar's birth to the crossing of the Rubicon and includes introductory chapters on the history of Rome from its foundation to the time of Sulla.



nations into a better future, and that those nations then face the decision whether to follow these men or not.⁸⁷

The inclusion of Napoleon here shows that while ostensibly the *Histoire* is about Caesar and how the Romans ultimately made the wrong decision not to follow him, it is in fact also about Napoleon and the wrong decision of the European leaders to oust him. For Louis Napoleon, analysing Caesar's campaigns was not aimed at gaining any insights into the general nature of war but at justifying his politics and through this apology ultimately vindicating his uncle. The study of Caesar thus had been turned into a propaganda tool.

Now, the renewed and intensified interest into Caesar that can be observed particularly in Germany, also had another reason that lay, as had been the case with the Oranian army reform, in the combination of military reforms and changes in the general educational background. After the defeat of 1806 at the hands of Napoleon, Prussian military reformers went about forming a new modern army,⁸⁸ and one of the key elements of the Prussian army reform was a thorough revision of the recruitment and education of future officers. Also a new military academy, the *Kriegsschule*, was founded in 1808,⁸⁹ aimed at providing officers with both adequate training and a sound general education. The founders thought the study of the general nature of war quintessential for any future officers, and therefore these invariably had to come into contact with ancient military history in general and the great commanders of antiquity in particular. Obviously, Caesar was to occupy a prominent place here as his own comments on his actions were easily accessible.

After other European countries had begun to follow suit in reforming their officers' education and training, interest in Caesar was to a certain extent actively promoted at the military academies throughout Europe. Now, in Germany, general changes in secondary school education even led to the ground being almost as well prepared for a discussion of ancient military events as had been the case in the 16th century. The latter half of the 19th century saw the continuous rise of the so-called humanistic grammar school offering an education that was almost completely focussed on classics. As secondary school education was one of the prerequisites of admission to one of the military academies, many students after the 1850s and 1860s were already well-acquainted with most of the more important ancient authors.

The military reform and the developments in school education made an increased interest into Caesar and ancient military theory in general at the same time desirable and possible. It is noteworthy that at least in Germany military theorists, while not directly trying to take lessons from ancient military history, did not completely adhere to Clausewitz' judgement on its uselessness either. In the case of Caesar he was supposed to have already had fully understood the concept of speed and surprise, even though a closer look at his campaigns shows that this was very likely not the case.

In a similar way the concept of the one, big battle deciding the war, the *Entscheidungsschlacht*, which in Prussia originally dated back to the days of Clausewitz and had been refined with the introduction of encirclement tactics from the 1860s onwards, created a certain fascination with the battle of Cannae - Schlieffen for example wrote a small but still quite useful study on it.⁹⁰ It has to be noted, though, that of all major ancient battles, Cannae is probably the least useful to support the theory of *Entscheidungsschlacht*.

⁸⁷ L. Napoleon, *Histoire de Jules Cesar*. vol. I, Paris 1865, vii.

⁸⁸ On the army reform see A. G. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945*, Oxford 1955, 69sq.

⁸⁹ On the history of the Prussian military academy cf. L. Scharfenort, *Die Königlich-Preußische Kriegsakademie 1810-1910*, Berlin 1910, 60-190.

⁹⁰ A. v. Schlieffen, *Cannae*, Berlin 1925.



VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, a fairly clear picture of the way Caesar was read by military theorists from the 16th to the 19th century emerges. In the 16th and early 17th century he was among the ancient writers that were thought to be directly useable on the battlefield; interest into them benefited greatly from a general interest into antiquity as well as similarities between ancient warfare and that of the 16th century. As those similarities rapidly disappeared during the following century, ancient military theorists began to lose their practical usefulness, while the emerging concept of the principles of war led to a different approach to Caesar focussing more on his general understanding of war and his general leadership abilities; Napoleon is testimony to both developments. Despite dramatic changes in warfare during the 19th century, Caesar did not cease to be of interest for military theorists; instead, due to reforms in recruitment and education of officers Caesar found his way into the *curricula* of war academies all across Europe. Particularly in Germany educational developments outside the military world had a profound influence on this development.

It was not until the years immediately before the outbreak of the First World War that the interest into Caesar at the military academies had to give way to the necessities of 20th century warfare. But even then, military theorists did not turn their attention completely away from him. In 1939 Charles Willoughby, who was to serve with MacArthur's staff during the Second World War, followed Napoleon in emphasising the importance of the general principles of warfare which could be acquired only by studying the great commanders of military history - Caesar prominently among them.⁹¹

⁹¹ C. A. Willoughby, *Maneuver in War*, Harrisburg 1939, 26.



Fuller, Liddell Hart and Classical Military History

By Professor Brian Bond, President Emeritus BCMH

Why did Fuller and Liddell Hart find classical warfare so important?

There were at least three answers:

- 1) To find a more efficient way of fighting war than displayed in the First World War,
- 2) They believed that Ancient history provided clear lessons in strategy and tactics,
- 3) They wanted to rediscover heroic leaders rather than, as they saw them, the mediocrities thrown up by the Great War. In this context they demonstrated their belief in the Great Man theory in history.

Fuller had always had been interested in classical warfare. He had said that he had been inspired by Alexander the Great's emphasis on concentration and surprise when drawing up Plan 1919. He was struck by Alexander's achievements as a very young commander. He was only 31 when he died. He also noted that Scipio Africanus had won the Battle of Zama when in his mid thirties.

Fuller thought mechanisation would provide mobility and therefore restore decisiveness to the battlefield. Small élite forces would regain their importance. Whilst Fuller lectured on Alexander at the Staff College in the 1920s he only found time later in life to publish his studies of Alexander and Julius Caesar – both highly rated by classical scholars.

Liddell Hart took Scipio as the subject of his first substantial book in 1926. The title "A Greater than Napoleon" makes clear the book's polemic interest and was ridiculed by some critics including Fuller. His interest was in looking at how to prevent another attritional stalemate. He tended to blame Napoleon and Clausewitz for introducing the idea of the decisive battle to be decided by numbers. In the Great War the allies had attacked the main enemy army directly without surprise. At the same time he was developing his ideas of the Strategic Indirect Approach including Strategic Bombing. These ideas were not directly relevant to a study of Scipio but were not so intrusive as to spoil the book for readers interested in classical history.

I'll now look at Liddell Hart's book and the impact that it had when it was published. He used only two main sources, Polybius and Livy. There was no previous military biography and to that extent he had a clear field. Liddell Hart had consulted some of the best classical historians of the day and this gave more weight to his study.

As might be expected from a successful journalist, the book was well written with good maps. It took a very positive view of its subject. One might say that this young biographer (aged 31 in 1926) took a shine to this young commander.

Scipio had made his reputation in Spain in his mid twenties. He made good use of seapower and surprise to take the coastal city of Cartagena. His campaigning was marked by speed of movement and rigorous pursuit but he also took care of his logistics. Liddell Hart particularly praised his restrained treatment of prisoners and defeated opponents so obtaining later allies and reducing resistance after his victories.



While Hannibal dallied in Southern Italy, Scipio took a great and bitterly opposed gamble by adopting an indirect approach by landing in Africa rather than meeting him head on in Italy. This took Hannibal by surprise. Scipio then marched to an area to which Hannibal would have to react for logistic reasons. By seizing the initiative in this way he gained an edge which offset his inferiority in numbers. In conclusion, he noted that Scipio's main claim to be the outstanding commander in classical times lay in the fact that he had beaten another famous general (Hannibal) whereas other great generals, including Alexander, did not face top class opponents.

In short, Scipio was one of the greatest generals of all time!

Liddell Hart also drew a number of parallels with his contemporary world. He felt that airpower would offer better control of armies in the future. Also, Scipio's use of cavalry was a precursor of the modern mechanised pursuit. Scipio's restrained treatment of prisoners had a recent parallel in Pétain's handling of the French mutinies.

In the future, Liddell Hart believed, civilised nations should wage war by modern means including gas and tanks. Gas might not be humane but its effect was to reduce deaths on the battlefield. Strategic Bombing would be terrible, whilst it lasted, but effective in that it would bring wars to a swifter conclusion. Liddell Hart, in short, was looking for ways to make future wars short and decisive after the vast destruction and mass slaughter of the First World War.

Liddell Hart also felt that Scipio's wise treatment of Hannibal contrasted with the Versailles *diktat*. He also admired Scipio's quiet return to Rome after his battles and retirement rather than the seeking of political power. Some of his views on Italy and the Italian army gained him an interview with Mussolini in 1927 but, unlike Fuller, he was not attracted to fascism.

The book appeared to favourable reviews. It was well-written and its vividness and freshness appealed to many. Milne adopted the book as one of the 12 to be read by the leaders of the Experimental Mechanised Force. It was read and praised by Dill, Gort, T E Lawrence and Churchill.

Fuller, for his part, was not convinced by the indirect approach as a "cure all". He felt the direct approach was often likely to be the most prudent course and the best albeit depending on circumstances. General Bartholomew referred to Liddell Hart's one-sided use of examples to demonstrate his historical ideas.

In conclusion Fuller and Liddell Hart ransacked history to demonstrate that the Great War had been fought incompetently by people educated in the tradition of Napoleon and Clausewitz. A Great Captain should, Liddell Hart concluded, avoid direct approaches and

- No general should make a Direct Attack against an enemy in a strong position,
- The equilibrium of an enemy in position should always be upset before an offensive was launched.

Liddell Hart's theories were suitable for stimulating discussion at Sandhurst or the Staff College but his approach was too theoretical and didactic to be a very helpful guide to those who shaped British strategy in Whitehall. Britain seldom had *carte blanche* in strategic



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options at the start of a war but rather had to react to offensive initiatives already taken by her enemies. She was also often severely restricted in her strategic choices by the necessity of waging war with Continental allies. In general it seems likely that on the broad theme of learning from past wars Clausewitz's view has prevailed over that suggested in "Scipio Africanus"; namely that more practical lessons are likely to be learned from recent rather than ancient conflicts.