CHAPTER SIX

RED CLIFFS 208

Government of the empire
To defeat in Jing province
War on water: weapons, techniques and tactics

Chronology¹

208 Sun Quan destroys Liu Biao’s general Huang Zu and enters the middle Yangzi
   summer: Cao Cao becomes Imperial Chancellor of Han
   autumn: Cao Cao moves against Liu Biao in Jing province;
            execution of Kong Rong
            Liu Biao dies; his son Liu Zong surrenders to Cao Cao
   Liu Bei flees to the south, Sun Quan sends troops to assist him
   winter: Sun Quan’s general Zhou Yu and the allied army defeat
           Cao Cao at the Red Cliffs; he withdraws to the north
           Zhou Yu attacks Cao Ren in Jiangling; Sun Quan attacks
           Hefei; Liu Bei takes over the commanderies south of the
           middle Yangzi

Government of the empire

Fresh from victory in the north, Cao Cao returned to his base territory, reaching Ye city in the first month of 208. Though the emperor continued to maintain his puppet court at Xu, and that city was recognised as the imperial capital, Ye was now Cao Cao’s military headquarters and the centre of his power. His main army was based there, and he had the Xuanwu “Dark Warrior” Pond constructed at this time so that

¹ Major sources for events in this year are recounted in SGZ 1:30–31, in the biographies of Liu Biao and his sons at HHS 74/64B:2423–24 and SGZ 6:213–16, and in the Annals/Biographies of Liu Bei at SGZ Shu 2:877–79 and of Sun Quan at SGZ Wu 2:1117–18. They are presented in chronicle order by ZZTJ 65:2076–96; deC, Establish Peace, 368–403. Sources on the Red Cliffs campaign are given in notes to that account from 266 to 275 below.
the men could gain experience in manoeuvring ships and fighting on water. The campaign in the north had been long and hard, but Cao Cao was already preparing for an attack towards the Yangzi.

There was no particular urgency to the enterprise, however, and during the first half of 208 Cao Cao paid chief attention to the strengthening and organisation of his government, making a number of changes and putting new systems in place. It is not always possible to date the reforms precisely, as many took time to establish and were liable to amendment according to circumstances and results. They are better discussed by theme than by order of dates.

Chapter Four has considered the nature of warfare at this time, and the informal structures which formed the original fighting forces. The core of Cao Cao’s power, of course, was his main army, developed by years of warfare into a powerful and experienced fighting force, kept under his personal command, and this was the instrument by which he sought to hold or extend his power, whether dealing with the Yuan family, with the hostile Wuhuan, or with Liu Biao and other rivals.

This striking force was naturally supported by regular troops in camps and garrisons, and commanders such as Cao Ren on the Han and Zhang Liao on the Huai had to deal on occasion with heavy attacks from the south. It was the duty of these subordinates to hold their territory with the resources they had to hand, but if need arose Cao Cao would come in full force to deal with the enemy.

In this regard, while it would be unfair to claim that Cao Cao did not trust his officers—and many of them showed remarkable loyalty and courage in his service—it was difficult for him to delegate, and he had a natural reluctance to allow anyone else to hold military power

---

2 SJZ 9:338–39 (SJZS 79a–80a) says that the Huan River divided to form two streams, of which the northern branch flowed past the east of Ye city, then turned west along the northern wall to join the River Zhang; it was close to this junction that Cao Cao created the Xuanwu Pond: SJZ 9:338–39 (SJZS 79a–80a).

In his Weidu fu “Rhapsody on the Capital of Wei,” composed some seventy years later, Zuo Si describes the Xuanwu Pond as a lake at the centre of a pleasure park, which the commentator Li Shan says lay west of Ye city: WH 6:1345–46; Knechtges I, 447. See further in Chapter Eight at 336.

Zuo Si does not mention the lake being used for practicing naval manoeuvres, and it appears to have become no more than an ornamental feature. Soon after its construction, Cao Cao gained access to the Han River in Jing province and to the lake-lands about the Huai in the southeast, and these served his purposes better.