THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF WAR AND THE 5TH C. ‘INVASIONS’

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which warfare is particularly characteristic of the 5th c. and whether the typical scholarly focus on barbarian invasion in this period is justified by the evidence. It then examines the ways in which archaeological and literary evidence do and do not shed light on one another in the context of 5th c. warfare, taking a series of specific examples, including the re-occupation of high places in northern Spain, the ethnic interpretation of artefacts in Mesetan cemeteries, and the evidence of violence from Late Roman Emerita Augusta.

The 5th c. A.D. and its tangled politics involved a great deal of warfare, although we may well doubt whether warfare was dramatically more common than in previous centuries of Roman history. It is impossible to find a Roman century, the golden age of the 2nd c. A.D. not excepted, in which the Roman State was more often at peace than at war: thanks to political imperatives of varying sorts—aristocratic rivalry on the one hand, imperial ideology and legitimacy on the other—both Republican and Imperial history are dyed a bloody red, no doubt part of Roman history’s eternal appeal to the popular audience. Despite this, warfare undoubtedly tends to loom larger in accounts of the 5th c. than it does in earlier periods, even for professional historians. The most charitable explanation might put this scholarly emphasis down to sparseness in the extant evidence, in which warfare consumes a disproportionately large amount of space. Alternatively, and more plausibly, it may simply be that modern narratives of invasion and imperial collapse—many provinces did, after all, cease to be governed by a Roman emperor in the 5th c.—have conditioned us to overlook much of the empirical evidence in front of us, a problem exacerbated by the recent tendency to make ethnicity and ethnogenesis the focus of research on the late ancient barbarians, to the exclusion of almost everything else.

Another question altogether is raised when archaeological evidence is brought into the equation. After all, 5th c. warfare would seem to raise no unique methodological considerations for either historian or archaeologist,
war being war in the ancient world, and its technology and effects largely invariant.¹ Nevertheless, the over-arching historiography of the 5th c. has indeed had a substantial—and, one can safely suggest, deleterious—effect on our understanding of both warfare and social changes more generally. What follows will consider three questions in turn. The first is historiographical, whether we ought really to mark the 5th c. out as a period especially characterised by invasions and by warfare consequent upon them. The second is methodological, and of wide application, whether we should try to link together the literary and archaeological evidence for 5th c. warfare, and if so, how closely. The third is illustrative, an exemplary case in which archaeological and literary evidence do indubitably cast light on, without necessarily serving to confirm, refute, or supplement, one another.

The larger interpretative question must be primary, because it conditions everything we do with the history of the period. Despite general assumptions, there is a real doubt over how much invasion really does set the 5th c. off from other periods of Roman history, and how much invasion and its consequences characterise the military history of the period. The 3rd c. witnessed demonstrably more invasions, over a greater area of the empire, than did the 5th c.; more imperial campaigns are attested along the Rhine and Danube in the 4th c. than in the 5th c. Actual invasions of the western provinces from outside the empire are confined, during the 5th c., to two rather short periods, first between A.D. 405 and 409, with Radagaisus and the Rhine crossing, then between 451 and 453, when Attila turned from east to west. Yet, in the grand narratives, this century is, indelibly and perhaps inevitably, that of the great invasions, the culmination of les vagues germaniques or the Völkerwanderung. As historians’ shorthand, that may be harmless enough, but only if it does not prejudice our analyses of specific historical data—as it most certainly has done.

Because at the start of the 5th c. there was a western Roman emperor and at its end there was not, narratives of foreign conquest remain persistent, and the world has recently been treated to a confident re-affirmation of the old, old narrative of violent, fundamentally alien barbarians destroying an Empire chronically incapable of realising that it should have fought back harder.² It is, therefore, worth our insisting upon a couple of points. Most of the warfare of the 5th c. took place between armies resident on imperial soil. The fact that some of those armies were commanded by

¹ That, at least, is one of the chief inferences to be drawn from Sabin et al. (2007).
² Heather (2005).