TACTICS: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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BATTLEFIELD TACTICS

This section begins with a review of work devoted to the relevant literary sources before examining, in turn, the two principal periods covered by the literature: the 4th c. and the 6th c., which has been termed here ‘the Justinianic era’. It then reviews ‘continuity’ theories, which warn against accepting too readily generalisations concerning tactical changes across the various chronological periods. Finally, it briefly introduces the ‘face of battle’ literature, which takes issue with the command-centric perspective of much of the writing on the battles of antiquity.

Scholarly interest in Late Roman battlefield tactics is relatively recent. The majority of work in this area has been produced during the last 15 to 20 years. This has owed much to the wider boom in studies on Late Antiquity, and also to changing research priorities in the field of Roman military studies: from social and economic elements of the Roman army to military operations. Since the early to mid 1990s, a series of works have addressed issues of tactics and combat, and, in doing so, have overturned traditional notions of military ‘decline and fall’. The growth of ‘late antique’ studies as a discipline has also meant that, rather than petering out in the final decades of the West Roman Empire, the subject now also covers the East Roman Empire up to the 630s.

Much of the work on Late Roman battlefield tactics consists of sub-sections of articles and syntheses on the Roman army, or work on specific literary sources. This means that it tends to be devoted to battlefield tactics in general. Although works on particular tactical roles, formations, or manoeuvres do exist, they are not sufficiently numerous to merit a specialised sub-division of the essay along the same lines as the previous bibliographic essay on equipment and weaponry. The references which follow the different sections have been divided up as much as possible, although, because a number of common themes and approaches to battlefield tactics permeate the literature on all periods, some references appear in numerous sub-sections of the text. Cross references are included where necessary.
Finally, it should be noted that this section is given over to literature which looks purely at battle tactics, and which is largely based on the literary sources. Military equipment studies which are included in the previous bibliographic essay also contribute to the debate insofar as they identify the types of weapons and armour used on the battlefield, the techniques with which they were employed, and purposes for which they were used. Links have been drawn between these studies and battlefield tactics (for instance, Elton (1996) 110 contends that the *spatha* must have been a secondary weapon given the lack of room in Late Roman close order infantry formations for wielding this type of long sword—this reference is included in 2. *The 4th to 5th c.* below). However, such hypotheses remain highly subjective, and for the purposes of this essay, it will be simpler to follow the structure of most volumes on the Roman army, and keep military equipment studies and works on Roman battlefield tactics separate.

1. **Sources**

Much of the secondary literature makes clear that general conclusions regarding Roman tactics and their transformation and evolution must remain largely speculative and subjective considering the paucity, patchiness and questionable reliability of the literary evidence (for instance, Nicasie (1998) 187; Le Bohec (2006) 125, both included below, in section 2. *The 4th to 5th c.*). The survival of more sources for some periods than others is as always a crucial problem, leading to the inevitable danger that modern scholars will base an argument solely upon an example which is in fact unrepresentative. The literary nature of Ammianus Marcellinus’ and Procopius’ battle narratives poses an obstacle to those studying battlefield tactics in Late Antiquity (Matthews (1989) 286–303; Kelly (2008); Barnes (1998); Austin (1979); Crump (1975); Naudé (1958); and Trombley (1999) on Ammianus, Rance (2005); Kaldellis (2007); Breccia (2004); and Whately (2009) on Procopius). Written for civilian audiences and within the boundaries of the classicising literary genre, they employ stereotypical descriptions and flowery references to ancient authors, and home in on the heroic exploits of particular soldiers, thereby omitting the technical details and tactical analysis modern historians yearn for.

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1 See also the ‘General Primary Sources’ section of the paper, ‘War in Late Antiquity: Secondary Works, Primary Sources and Material Evidence’ in this collection.