

David A. Graff: *The Eurasian Way of War. Military practice in seventh-century China and Byzantium*. Asian States and Empires (ed. Peter Lorge)¹¹. Routledge: London – New York 2016. ISBN: 978-0-415-46034-7 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-315-62712-0 (ebk) 208 p.

The name of David Andrew Graff is familiar for those who are interested in premodern Asian military history. The sinologist author studied warfare in medieval China since the beginning of his academic career, since 1998 he is the editor of the *Journal of Chinese Military History* and secretary of the *Chinese Military History Society*. He published a fundamental monograph on medieval Chinese warfare in the series *Warfare and History* of Routledge Publisher in 2002.¹ The author is an acknowledged authority of Chinese military history as a professor at Kansas State University.

The significance of the monograph under discussion extends beyond East Asian or Chinese military history. It attempts to answer questions of technology transfer and warfare like the spread of military innovations and distinguishing regional ways of war such as ‘Western’ or ‘Oriental’ by a comparison between 7th-century Byzantine and Tang warfare.

The book raises a bold question with the comparison of late antique military manuals of empires located at opposite edges of the Old World. The two key texts are the *Strategikon* written at the turn of 6th and 7th centuries attributed to the emperor Maurice and a lost Chinese military manual (*Li Jing bingfa*) by a 7th-century Tang General Li Jing survived only in extracts. Graff did even more: he exhaustively described 7th-century Chinese and Byzantine warfare and attempted to explain the convergence of these two independent systems.

Consequently, the book is a good read not only for military historians but also for researchers on global connectivity, interactions between the steppe and the sown and history of technology. The welcoming reception of this monograph by Mongolian Studies,² Chinese – Türk cultural relations,³ late antique history⁴ and military history⁵ shows its popularity among various branches of scholarship.

The structure of the monograph is logical and practical consisting of seven chapters: the first historiographical chapter on the relation of war and culture is followed by a presentation of the 7th-century Chinese (Sui and early Tang) and Byzantine armies highlighting their resources, weaponry and tactics (2nd-4th chapters). The second half of the book offers interpretative answers for the above questions emphasizing the role of literary and textual traditions in the record and transfer of military knowledge. The investigative chapters (6-7) present these remote superpowers’ sporadic diplomatic contacts and interactions, as well as the intermediary role of nomadic confederacies and empires between them. Finally, the author explains comparable features and convergences of these two separate military systems with similar adaptive answers to nomadic threat.

¹ (Graff 2002)

² (May 2015, 104–106.)

³ (Skaff 2017, 226–228.)

⁴ (Decker 2017, 802–803.)

⁵ (Davies 2017, 542–544.)

The historiographical essay on the relation of war and culture enquires the question of how the content of a 7th-century Chinese and European military manual can be so similar despite the vast geographical distance. Since the mid-20th century the belief in general principles of war resigned for a cultural-historical approach studying various ways of war and strategic cultures. The most prominent military historian of our days, John Keegan even called war as an „*expression of culture*”.⁶ The notion of „*Western Way of War*” as a particular and timeless European type of warfare deriving from the tactics of ancient Greeks hoplites and characterized by quick problem solving, decisive battle, and frontal attacks⁷ stems from this culture-centric approach. Its counterpart, the „*Oriental Way of War*” was characterized by ‘evasion, delay and indirectness’ by Keegan.⁸ The information obtained from the two main sources presented by this book contradict this static framework. During the 7th century Chinese warfare was too western and aggressive, while Byzantine way of war proved to be too Asian and defensive questioning the exactness of these categories. In his book, Graff cut the Gordian knot and introduced the term „*Eurasian Way of War*”.

The two empires: the Sui/Tang China and the Eastern Roman Empire possessed similar resources. Their territories and populations were comparable; their main difference was their geographic layout. China was basically a continental power with limited use of the navy, while the Eastern Roman Empire surrounded the Mediterranean Sea; it resulted in a powerful fleet exploiting its long and articulated coastline. The geostrategic considerations particularly highlight the lack of maps in this book. The two empires also differed in the number and organisation of soldiers: China used the system of part-time military service (*fubing*) beginning from the Warring States Period. The Byzantine Empire formed a permanent and professional army smaller in number. At the same time, the expeditionary troops numbered between 12,000 and 20,000 in both areas.

The armies of these two states used weaponry on a similar technological level; the only significant exception was the frequent Chinese use of handheld crossbows. At the same time, at the end of the 6th century several types of military equipment appeared in the East Roman army as well as in early Avar burials. These artefacts were formerly unknown from western Eurasia, while frequently used in ancient China: lamellar armour,⁹ traction trebuchet and single-edged ring-pommel swords¹⁰ wrongly described as sabres in the book. The two military manuals report on similar tactical elements, and risk calculations played a comparable role in military decisions.

Campaigns relied on fundamental logistical planning like transfer, accommodation and food supply. The comparison between Chinese and Byzantine logistics failed in the absence of the recent and relevant literature on the logistical support of the East Roman Empire.¹¹ The author ascribed the poor logistics of the Byzantine Empire to the damaged roads and lack of

⁶ (Keegan 1994, 12.)

⁷ (Hanson 1989); (Hanson 2001)

⁸ (Keegan 1994, 387–388.)

⁹ (Bugarski 2005, 161–178.); (Glad 2012, 349–362.); (Glad 2015, 113–127.)

¹⁰ (Csiky 2015, 233–234.); from Byzantine context: Justiniana Prima (Caričin Grad, a church’s crypt): (Quast 2012, 361.); (Glad 2015, 319, 324.)

¹¹ (Haldon 2006); (Whately 2013); (Sarantis 2019, 329–379.)

distribution centres of supply compared to Tang China interlaced with canals. In fact, a dense network of fortresses and fortified cities with granaries served the logistical need of the East Roman army between the 4th and 7th centuries. Fortifications were not only designed for passive defence, but also for an active distribution of food supply.¹² The Danube as the main artery of riverine transport compensated for the lack of canals in the frontier zone.¹³ The author rightly argues for a significant role of fortresses and sieges, however, some minor inaccuracies occur in the descriptions of major sieges.¹⁴

The 7th-century Chinese and Byzantine military practice matched even the modern expectations in terms of organisation, discipline and risk management. This consciousness derived from the accumulation of several generations' experiences by literary and textual traditions which characterised both bureaucratic empires. Both states had a great tradition of writing military manuals used and even brought to campaigns by generals. Both armies' administrations kept a large number of records, lists and reports. These documents survived only as paper fragments from the Western Regions of Tang China or as late antique papyruses from Egypt. These living traditions inherited from Antiquity led to the continuous development of armies and generalship.

The vast distance between China and the Mediterranean seriously questions every historical comparison between these remote areas; however, the two empires were aware of each other and had diplomatic and commercial relations beginning from the Han-period. These accidental and sparse encounters and the blurred and uncertain information on each other limited the spread of military innovations.

Both empires had close contacts with their northern nomadic neighbours (Türks and Avars) providing a connecting link by the Eurasian steppe zone between East and West. The author regarded the migration of the Avars coming from Inner Asia¹⁵ as a transmission vector of East Asian technology reviewing sources and literature on the origin of the Avar elite and enumerating a series of East Asian military innovations adopted by the Byzantine based on the Strategikon.

The description of Avar – Byzantine interactions contains several inaccuracies. The formation of sabre cannot be dated to the period of Avar migration (mid-6th century), it was a process circa 100 years later.¹⁶ Moreover, the paramerion interpreted as a single-edged sword or sabre was a weapon of the Middle Byzantine Period (9th-10th centuries).¹⁷ The Chinese origin of P-shaped suspension loops is highly questionable since they appear contemporary with the European specimens at the end of the 6th century in China.¹⁸ Ring-pommel swords represent a new element in the list of weapons of Asian origin: such swords were frequent in the burials of the

¹² (Sarantis 2013, 36–40.)

¹³ On the Danube fleet and transport: (Bounegru és Zahariade 1996); (Karagiorgou 2001, 129–166.); (Curta 2016, 307–334.)

¹⁴ The author attributed the Avar siege of Constantinople in the summer of 626 also to the Persians located on the Asian side of the Bosphorus and could not participate in the siege: (Hurbanič 2019, 205–207.)

¹⁵ New palaeogenetic data on the origin of the Avar elite: (Csáky, és mtsai. 2020)

¹⁶ (Csiky 2015, 192–214, 318–325.)

¹⁷ (Haldon 1975, 31.); (Theotokis 2018, 448–449.)

¹⁸ The earliest P-shaped suspension loop from China is dated to 569: (Koch 1998, 574.); (Csiky 2015, 311–314.)

early Avar elite from the Danube-Tisza Interfluve (Central Hungary) without local precedents. At the same time, this weapon type was continuously popular in China since the 4th century, and new Inner Asian finds confirm the possibility of an Avar transmission.¹⁹

Lamellar armour and stirrups were in use in China long before their arrival to Europe around the formation of the Avar Qaghanate in the Danube Basin.²⁰ Graff regarded the European appearance of the traction trebuchet as a result of an Avar transmission similarly to various researchers. The exact date of the stirrups' and traction trebuchet's adoption by the Byzantines is not so unambiguous. The first mention of stirrups in Maurice's *Strategikon* does not enumerate it among the innovations of Avar origin; it does not even emphasize its novelty. Moreover, based on archaeological evidence from the Balkans, Byzantines widely used stirrups by the end of the 6th century, although their shape and manufacturing technique distinguished these artefacts from stirrups found in Avar burials.²¹ According to some philological analyses of the *Strategikon*, Byzantines used stirrups in the first half of the 6th century.²²

Traction trebuchet replaced early Roman torsion artillery, first of all the onager, offering a simple technique, larger projectiles and higher effective range. The early 6th-century sources mention this siege engine with the term *helepolis* used by the Byzantine army even before the arrival of the Avars to Europe.²³ Theophylact's anecdote on a Byzantine traitor, Bouzas at the siege of Appiaria who allegedly taught the Avars how to build siege engines, reveals further contradictions. Besides the literary topoi included in the story, not only the Avars used such siege engines earlier, but also the Eastern European Kutrigurs preceding them.²⁴ Traction trebuchet was already known in the Arabian Peninsula in the early 7th century²⁵ which questions the transmission through the steppe and suggests a Near Eastern technology transfer through the Sasanians.

Graff regards the Avar transmission of the mentioned weapons and military equipment as proved. However, regarding the lack of literacy among the Avars, he refuses the probability of a nomadic mediation of tactical elements and ideas. At the same time, the direction, date and way of transmission of the mentioned weapons and military equipment are also uncertain.

In the final chapter of the book, David A. Graff formulated a comprehensive thesis according to which not only military equipment of armies in Sui/Tang China and 6th-7th-century Byzantine Empire was similar, but also their tactics, the logistics of campaigns and even the long-term strategic targets. Graff ascribed these common points to the similar challenges these empires faced. Throughout their history, both empires confronted with troops of Eurasian steppe nomadic confederacies which determined their weaponry, tactics and strategic thought by their literary traditions and the nomadic federates (or mercenaries) serving in their armies.

¹⁹ (Csiky 2015, 233–234, 315–318.)

²⁰ On Chinese lamellar armour: (Dien 1981, 5–66.); (Csiky forthcoming)

²¹ (Бугарски 2007, 251–267.); (Ivanišević és Bugarski 2012, 135–142.)

²² (Kraft 2012, 155–192.); (Шувалов 2014, 568–576.)

²³ (Petersen 2013, 411.)

²⁴ (Kardaras 2005, 53–65.)

²⁵ (Chevedden 1996, 47–93.); (Chevedden 1998, 179–222.); (Petersen 2013, 406–429.)

Nomadic art of war fundamentally influenced Byzantine and Chinese warfare and transformed the armies of both empires. However, these two states experienced these impacts in different ways, and not only nomads affected their military affairs. The biggest difference between China and Byzantium was the three hundred years long fragmentation before Li Jing characterised by non-Han, nomadic rule in Northern China. The three hundred years-long age of fragmentation before Li Jing characterised by non-Han, nomadic rule in Northern China meant a huge difference. The barbarian rule manifested not only through the imperial family and the power of a small elite, but several nomads immigrated in the empire acculturating to the Chinese civilisation but preserving their language, customs and way of war.²⁶ The position of this barbarian elite is comparable to the Germanic kingdoms on the ruins of the West Roman Empire. These rulers accepted their dependence from the (East or West) Roman emperor,²⁷ while northern barbarians in China founded imperial dynasties. By contrast, the East Roman Empire maintained its Roman imperial power, legal system and culture, as well as its Greek language and the Christian religion. In this empire, the army employed nomadic cavalry only as federates together with a significant Germanic influence on military affairs.

Ignoring this fundamental political, social and cultural difference between the two empires, the author emphasizes religion and human resources as distinguishing factors. The Christian Byzantine Empire provided strong ideological support for its armed forces, while China's enormous human resources – enabling massive invasions against Korea or the Türk Qaghanate – compensated for its religious fragmentation. Graff characterised Byzantine 'grand strategy' with diplomacy, bribery and alliance-building following Luttwak,²⁸ which was only valid for some periods and regions. The ever-changing combinations of imperial ambitions and regional strategies formed the Byzantine Empire's responses to various threats²⁹ instead of an overarching vision of grand strategy.

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²⁶ (Dien 2007); (Lewis 2009, 54–85.); (Holcombe 2013, 1–38.); (Dien és Knapp 2019)

²⁷ (Scholl 2017, 19–38.)

²⁸ (Luttwak 2009)

²⁹ (Sarantis 2013)

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