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HIDDEN TRADITION OF MILITARY ANTHROPOLOGY IN EUROPEAN THINKING

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ABSTRACT: *The aim of this article is to uncover the hidden historical tradition of military anthropology in European thinking and to demonstrate that the anthropological perspective on war did not "emerge" only in the 20th and 21st centuries but has been present in reflections on warfare since antiquity. Through the works of Plato, Xenophon, Thucydides, Julius Caesar, Titus Livius, Machiavelli, and Clausewitz, the study reconstructs an intellectual trajectory in which war appears not merely as a technical or strategic phenomenon, but as a mirror of human nature and social norms. The article shows how the armed forces became social and cultural institutions in the modern era, and how methods from cultural anthropology were gradually integrated into military studies. In its final part, the paper uses the example of the Sahel region to illustrate how the toolkit of military anthropology can contribute to understanding complex, multi-layered security challenges. It argues that military anthropology constitutes a key language of dialogue between military science and the humanities, and that without it, the contemporary operational environment – especially in postcolonial theatres – cannot be adequately understood.*

KEYWORDS: *military anthropology, military culture, civil-military cooperation, Sahel region, postcolonial conflicts*

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropology is the discipline that studies the human being as a biological, cultural, and social creature: it examines how human communities live, think, organise themselves, and change over time. Its interest extends to the body, everyday practices, symbolic meanings, rituals, and relations of power, that is, to the ways in which a given society is constituted and maintains itself, whether civilian or military. Traditionally, two main branches are distinguished: physical anthropology and cultural anthropology; one of the specific subfields of the latter is military anthropology.

Military anthropology as an autonomous discipline is a relatively young field of study, which emerged at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, primarily in Anglo-Saxon military and cultural research (e.g., Winslow 1999; Ben-Ari 1998; Kilcullen 2009). Its essence is the study of human behaviour, identity, and cultural patterns in military and wartime contexts, that is, the exploration of how culture shapes and influences the

soldier, how the soldier shapes culture, how the relationship between the community and the soldiers is formed, and how all these affect the conduct of war. At the same time, the roots of this approach reach back much further than one might assume on the basis of modern terminology. The relationship among the human being, war, and society already appeared in the writings of ancient thinkers, even if they did not use the term "anthropology".

The anthropological dimension of war – that is, the interpretation of human conflicts within cultural and moral frameworks – is already present in Plato's *Politeia* (The Republic), where warfare appears as a metaphor for human nature and the structure of the state.[1] Similarly, Xenophon's *Anabasis* is not merely a military-historical account but also an empirical description of the behaviour, discipline, and values of the military community, which prepares the ground for the anthropological understanding of collective identity.[2]

The "tacit" presence of a military-anthropological perspective in these texts is therefore not a matter of terminology but that of viewpoint. Among ancient historians, several authors – for example, Thucydides and Titus Livius – wrote about war as a mirror of human nature and social order, in which patterns of behaviour, morality, fear, and honour are just as much subjects for observation and analysis as strategy or tactics.[3] This approach, namely the centrality of the human factor and culture, became a constant basic motif of later military thinking and, ultimately, a theoretical antecedent of modern military anthropology.

One of the most striking historical examples of the military-anthropological perspective is Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* (Commentaries on the Gallic War), which, at first sight, seems to be a campaign report but in fact constitutes a deeply empirical social observation. Caesar not only records military events, but also analyses the cultural characteristics, behavioural patterns, religious customs, and decision-making mechanisms of the Gallic tribes and their leaders.[4] These descriptions reveal that for the commander, the key to victory was not solely military superiority, but also an understanding of the enemy's culture – a realisation that is regarded today as one of the basic principles of military anthropology.

The classical representatives of Roman historiography, especially Titus Livius, further deepened this perspective. In his extensive work *Ab Urbe Condita,* Livius discusses war and military virtue not only in political, but also in moral and cultural contexts. For him, questions of human character, loyalty, and moral decay are closely linked to military performance and the fate of the empire.[5] This way, in Livius's work, warfare becomes a laboratory of human nature in which the dynamics of social norms and collective identity can be observed.

In the Renaissance, a new shift in perspective was brought by Machiavelli, who, in *Il Principe (The Prince)* and *Dell'arte della guerra (The Art of War)*, interprets war as an anthropological scene of political power.[6] For him, the human being is not merely a rational creature, but one moved by passions, fears, and interests, whose behaviour is just as important to understand in the exercise of power as it is on the battlefield. In doing so, Machiavelli builds a bridge between classical and modern military thinking: he recognises that successful command is not solely a technical question, but a profoundly anthropological one, based on knowledge of human nature.

1 Plato 1968.
2 Xenophon 1968.
3 Thucydides 2023; Livius 2002.
4 Caesar 1994.
5 Livius 2002.
6 Machiavelli 1987; 2001.

The tradition stretching from antiquity to the Renaissance thus sketches an implicit military-anthropological discourse in which war is not only a strategic event, but also a cultural mirror. In war, human beings reveal their own value system, social organisation, and moral boundaries – a recognition that will be systematised in the modern era by Clausewitz, when he describes war as a manifestation of the "human spirit".[7]

Modern military anthropology did not arise out of nothing: its theoretical roots lie in those historical and philosophical traditions that have always placed the human being at the centre of war. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, when the industrialisation of warfare and the emergence of nation-state armies created new types of human experience, Clausewitz recognised that war is "a special form of human intercourse", in which both rational and irrational forces are at work.[8] This idea – the human being as the principal variable of war – became one of the starting points of modern military-anthropological thinking.

From the mid-20th century onwards, the methods of social and cultural anthropology gradually entered the field of military studies, particularly in the United States and Great Britain (e.g., Janowitz 1960; Moskos 1977; Soeters–Wong 2014). In the context of the Cold War and post-colonial conflicts, the question of how the military organisation can be interpreted as a cultural system and the soldier as the bearer of a social role and identity re-emerged. Modern research works explicitly with anthropological categories when examining the armed forces as communities structured by rituals, symbols, and norms.[9]

Nevertheless, these modern approaches are deeply rooted in ancient and classical traditions of thought that portrayed the human being not only as a fighter, but also as an interpreting creature. Plato's guardian-warriors of the ideal state, Xenophon's self-disciplined mercenaries, Caesar's tactical observations, Livius's moral exempla, and Machiavelli's political realism all lead to the same recognition: war is not merely a technical practice, but a cultural and anthropological event.

This study argues that military anthropology is not a new invention, but the new language of the historical self-reflection of military thinking. When a 21st-century researcher examines military identity, social integration, or the effects of cultural differences on events in the theatre of operations, they are in fact asking the same questions as Thucydides or Machiavelli: what does war reveal about the human being, and how does culture influence the course and outcome of war? Recognising the historical continuity of this set of questions not only strengthens the scientific self-definition of military anthropology but also contributes to making military science an organic part of the human sciences.

Beyond its historical dimension, the question of military anthropology is also highly relevant in contemporary military practice. Although military anthropology is often perceived as a relatively recent and specialized field, its analytical relevance for contemporary armed forces is well established. Anthropological approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of military cultures, civil–military interaction, local social structures, and the limitations of purely technical or doctrinal solutions in complex operational environments. This article argues that such analytical sensibilities are not exclusively modern inventions but have deeper intellectual roots in European thinking. By examining earlier forms of culturally and socially informed military reasoning, the paper demonstrates that what today is referred to as military anthropology represents the rediscovery and systematisation of a much older, though largely unacknowledged, tradition.

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7 Clausewitz 2013.

8 Clausewitz 2013.

9 Winslow 1999; Ben-Ari 1998; Kilcullen 2009.

PLATO AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF MILITARY VIRTUE

Plato's (427–347) political philosophy aims not only at constructing the ideal state, but also at understanding human nature. In his work *Politeia,* the threefold division of the social structure – the orders of the rulers, the guardians (soldiers), and the producers – also functions as an anthropological model, in which the three parts of the human soul (reason, courage, and desire) take on social forms.[10] The military order, that is, the caste of guardians, represents the sphere of *thumos,* courage and honour, which plays a key role in maintaining social harmony. According to Plato:

"Good guardians are by nature at once gentle and brave: gentle towards their own people, but fierce towards the enemy. […] We must look for a soul in them in which these two qualities are in harmony."[11]

The Platonic guardian is not only a warrior but also a moral type, who through education *(paideia)* brings passions under discipline and places them at the service of the state.[12] This idea is closely linked to one of the basic tenets of military anthropology: the behaviour and identity of the soldier are not innate capabilities, but culturally shaped constructs. In Plato, military virtue *(andreia)* is a social construction mediated by the system of education, arts, and religious-symbolic order. The education of the guardians is not only physical training, but also a moral and aesthetic process that shapes the individual into a complete human being.

In Book V of *Politeia,* Plato goes even further: he abolishes private property and traditional family bonds among the guardians so that their loyalty to the state may be absolute and their actions in war may not be influenced by their material or familial background.[13] He writes: "Let no one say any longer that this or that belongs to him, but let all say: it is common to us, whether it be a house, a child, or anything else."[14]

This radical communal structure highlights the anthropological aspect of military identity: the individual finds self-identity in the collective ethos. In Plato's conception, war and military order are not ends in themselves, but metaphors for the preservation of the common good.

This conception of military ethos also reappears in modern military anthropology. Similar to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus,* the idea appears in Plato, namely that military virtues are learned patterns of behaviour arising from the interaction between individual and community.[15] Bodily practices, rituals, and shared education serve to symbolically reinforce identity – this cultural dimension is what distinguishes military anthropology from purely strategic military science.

In his late work *Laws,* Plato presents military education as a general form of civic virtue, emphasising that the army is not only an instrument of state defence, but also a means of the state's moral self-preservation. Here he writes:

[10] Plato 1968, III.
[11] Plato 1968, III, 410b–411a, translated into English by the author.
[12] Plato 1968, II–III.
[13] Plato 1968, V.
[14] Plato 1968, V, 464c.
[15] Bourdieu 1977.

"All education is a form of combat, and life in peace is also a school of war: for we must constantly struggle not only against others, but also against our own desires and pleasures."[16]

Here, war is no longer a mere response to an external threat, but a projection of the inner contradictions of human nature. This reflexive approach – linking military behaviour and human existence – provides one of the earliest antecedents of military anthropology.

In Plato's works, military order gradually becomes the moral and anthropological mirror of society. In *Politeia,* the caste of guardians is the bearer of *thumos,* courage, and honour: that part of the human soul which ensures the maintenance of order and self-control.[17] In Book V of *Politeia,* this military community, through the dissolution of personal bonds, becomes the symbol of absolute loyalty to the state: individual identity is dissolved in the communal ethos. Finally, in *Laws,* the concept of struggle is transformed: war is no longer merely an external compulsion, but a projection of the contradictions inherent in human nature, a kind of moral exercise in self-discipline.

In this developmental arc, the soldier is no longer merely an armed actor, but a cultural-anthropological type: a figure standing at the boundary of body, soul, and community. Military education *(paideia)* thus becomes the highest form of shaping the human being, transforming him through discipline and communal ethos.

This interpretation is of key importance to military anthropology, because it shows that military behaviour is not only a strategic, but also a cultural and ethical construct. In Plato, the defence of the state is in fact a metaphor for human self-knowledge: the struggle begins in the soul and continues in society.

XENOPHON AND THUCYDIDES: MILITARY EXPERIENCE AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL MIRROR

While Plato treats military virtue primarily as a normative and philosophical category, in the works of Xenophon (434–359) and Thucydides (460–395), warfare appears as a concrete human experience. The stories of the *Anabasis* and the *History of the Peloponnesian War* are not merely historical accounts, but also anthropological studies of collective action, discipline, fear, and leadership.

In *Anabasis,* Xenophon not only recounts the campaign of the Greek mercenaries but also examines a specific human survival mechanism: how a disintegrating community in a foreign land is able to reorganise itself based on shared norms, rituals, and loyalties.[18] In a crisis situation, when the original chain of command collapses, the survival of the military community depends on whether it is capable of appointing new leaders, accepting common rules, and reproducing cooperation based on trust. Xenophon's narrative clearly shows that the army is not merely a technical organisation, but a moral community in which survival depends on maintaining shared meanings and customs.

[16] Plato 1998, I, 626a–b, translated into English by the author.
[17] Plato 1968, IV.
[18] Xenophon 1968, I–III.

In the narrative of *Anabasis,* cultural adaptation also plays a prominent role: Greek mercenaries repeatedly come into contact with local communities whose language, customs, and norms they must at least partly understand in order to secure passage, supplies, or alliances.[19] The need to adjust to local rituals, practices of hospitality, and religious customs indicates that military success and survival depend not only on discipline and weaponry, but also on "cultural intelligence" – a realisation that foreshadows one of the fundamental ideas of modern military anthropology.

The difficulties accompanying the expedition – hunger, cold, and the proximity of the enemy – reveal the limits of human behaviour, and in this sense, *Anabasis* can be read as one of the earliest "field descriptions" of modern military anthropology. In Xenophon's text, the army appears as a community whose survival depends on the reproduction of trust, rituals, and shared interpretive frameworks.

Thucydides, by contrast, highlights the tragic constants of human nature in the context of war. The *History of the Peloponnesian War* is not a heroic epic, but an analytical anthropological diagnosis: in the course of war, social order and moral norms break down, and the instinctive forces inherent in the human being come to the surface.[20] The description of the Athenian plague, for example, shows how the combined presence of an epidemic and a war dismantles previously valid moral and legal norms: people no longer act according to law, but according to their fears and momentary desires.[21]

For Thucydides, war is not merely the result of political decisions, but a consequence of the deeper layers of human nature: the movements of ambition *(philotimia)*, fear *(phobos)*, and interest *(kerdos)* reveal the basic structures of human behaviour.[22] This perspective shows close affinity with 20th-century military anthropology, which examines war not only as a strategic, but also as a cultural and moral event.[23]

In the works of Xenophon and Thucydides, war is therefore both a social laboratory and a moral testing ground: a situation in which loyalty, power, and identity are reshaped. Military anthropology – although a modern term – essentially seeks answers to the same questions that Xenophon and Thucydides already raised: how do human beings behave in community, under conditions of power, and in extreme situations, and how do different cultures interact with one another in wartime?

This approach makes it possible for the soldier to appear not only as the embodiment of strategic rationality but also as a cultural actor whose actions can be interpreted within a system of values, symbols, and rituals. In this way, war becomes an anthropological event: a mirror of society and of human nature, in which every age can recognise itself.

JULIUS CAESAR, TITUS LIVIUS, AND MACHIAVELLI – THE BIRTH OF MILITARY RATIONALITY AND THE POLITICAL HUMAN

In Roman thinking, military experience is closely intertwined with the concepts of statehood and civic virtue. In the works of Julius Caesar (100–44), Titus Livius (59–17), and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), the figure of the soldier is no longer merely the guardian

[19] Xenophon 1968, IV–VI.
[20] Thucydides 2023, I–III.
[21] Thucydides 2023, II, 47–54.
[22] Thucydides 2023, III.
[23] cf. Janowitz 1960; Moskos 1977.

of moral order, but the embodiment of political rationality: the human being who acts according to the laws of power and survival.

In *Commentarii de Bello Gallico,* Julius Caesar's description of his campaigns is documentation and self-representation at once. Caesar presents his own military actions not as a heroic epic, but as a process of rational decision-making: he sets out in detail the features of the terrain, the alliance systems and internal divisions of the enemy tribes, as well as the logic of the organisation and movement of his own forces.[24] His description of the Gallic tribes – whether in terms of social hierarchy, religious customs, or modes of warfare – reveals the pragmatic, empirical side of the Roman outlook: military success depends on understanding the cultural specificities of the enemy.

In Caesar's narrative, the functioning of the army is, in an anthropological sense, the creation of order in chaos: discipline, hierarchy, and obedience appear as fundamental organising principles of Roman identity. The commander not only issues orders but also shapes a particular communal ethos in which military virtue – courage, endurance, and loyalty – can be understood as an extension of Roman civic virtue.

Titus Livius, by contrast, interprets the role of military virtue from a historical perspective. On the pages of *Ab Urbe Condita,* Roman history unfolds as a moral study, in which wars appear as stages of civilisational and moral development.[25] For Livius, military virtue *(virtus militaris)* signifies not only bravery, but also civic responsibility: loyalty to the community, obedience to the laws, and commitment to political stability. Through the figures of commanders and soldiers, the moral basic structure of Roman society becomes visible: the army is not a separate sphere, but the mirror of the moral order of society.

The Roman model thus shows the birth of the "political human" in an anthropological sense: the human being who interprets power, hierarchy, and collective identity according to their own cultural and social rules. This model had a decisive impact on Renaissance political thinking, particularly on Machiavelli.

In *Il Principe* and *Dell'arte della guerra,* Machiavelli interprets war as an anthropological stage of political power.[26] In his work, the figures of the soldier and the ruler come close to one another: both are moved by the same human instincts – fear, ambition, and desire for glory. According to Machiavelli, the state and the army are "manifestations of the same soul": both are arts of managing human nature. The success of the commander and the prince depends on the extent to which they are able to control passions, direct loyalties, and create order in a world marked by uncertainty and conflict.

Anthropologically speaking, Machiavelli describes the human of power: the actor who is at once the product and the shaper of his own cultural environment. In his work, military rationality is not a value-neutral technique, but a practice deeply embedded in culture and ethics. War is not exclusively a political instrument, but an expression of human nature: the meeting point of collective existence and individual ambition.

Thus, in the historical continuum of military anthropology, the works of Caesar, Livius, and Machiavelli mark a new era: the age of the rational, political human, in which war and human nature can no longer be separated. In this tradition, military experience is no longer merely organised violence, but a cultural practice that reveals the deepest layers of human action.

[24] Caesar 1994.
[25] Livius 2002.
[26] Machiavelli 2001.

CLAUSEWITZ AND THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF WAR

By the beginning of the 19th century, the interpretation of war had gone beyond purely technical and strategic levels: Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) defined war as a complex moral and social phenomenon of human existence. In his work *Vom Kriege (On War)*, war is no longer merely an armed conflict between states, but "the continuation of policy by other means", that is, the most acute manifestation of human will and emotion.[27]

For Clausewitz, war is not a mechanical process, but the interaction of irrational and rational forces emerging from human nature. This dynamic is expressed in his famous "trinity of war" *(wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit)*:

- The world of violence and passion (the people, the realm of instincts and emotions);
- the dimension of probability and chance (the sphere of the army and military leadership);
- and the sphere of political reason and purpose (the state as a rational organising principle).[28]

This threefold unity is not static in Clausewitz's thinking, but a constantly shifting system of equilibrium. The "fog" of war *(Nebel des Krieges)* and its "friction" *(Friktion)* are metaphors that point to the limits of human rationality, perception, and decision-making. Thus, war appears, in an anthropological sense, as a mirror of human existence: a situation in which instinct, fear, will, and belief play just as much a role as logic and strategy.

According to Clausewitz, the human being stands at the centre of military action, simultaneously a decision-maker and a prisoner of circumstances. The figure of the commander is therefore not merely a technical or administrative actor, but a moral and psychological centre: the success of war depends on character, judgement, and the capacity to be "courageous in understanding" *(Mut des Verstandes)*.[29] This way, Clausewitz anticipates the foundations of a later military-anthropological perspective: he interprets war as a system of human relations, in which decisions, emotions, and cultural patterns are at least as decisive as weapons and strategies. The human factor is therefore not a disturbing element, but the very essence of war.

WAR AS A HUMAN AND CULTURAL SPACE – CLAUSEWITZ'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL LEGACY

In Clausewitz's thinking, war is not merely a political instrument, but one of the basic structures of human culture. When he describes war as an "extended duel" *(erweiterter Zweikampf)*, he points out that violence and conflict are enduring companions of human existence.[30] By this, he does not praise war; on the contrary, he attempts to interpret the irrationality and tragic nature of human experience.

The "fog of war" symbolises not only the uncertainty of military operations, but also the limits of human cognition. According to Clausewitz's famous observation, "in war, everything that is simple is difficult", because the human mind is unable to fully grasp the

[27] Clausewitz 2013, translated into English by the author.
[28] Clausewitz 2013, I.
[29] Clausewitz 2013, I.
[30] Clausewitz 2013, I/1.

complexity of reality.[31] This recognition – that war is a stage for human errors, emotions, and limitations – makes Clausewitz one of the forerunners of a modern anthropological outlook.

In Clausewitz' view, the human being acting in war is not merely the instrument of his own rationality, but also the bearer of his own moral and cultural codes. Military decisions are underpinned by traditions, beliefs, and social norms: these determine what a commander regards as courage, honour, or necessity. When Clausewitz writes about the role of the commander, he emphasises that his activity cannot be defined solely by rules and calculations; judgement, experience, and a "spark of genius" are always present.[32]

This idea later became one of the antecedents of anthropological studies of military habitus and professionalism. In Pierre Bourdieu's conceptual framework, *habitus* denotes the totality of behaviour patterns embedded in culture; similarly, in Clausewitz, the commander and the soldier are products of a given cultural and moral field.[33] Military virtues – courage, loyalty, and self-discipline – are not biological givens but culturally coded norms, which the armed forces institutionalise and reproduce.[34]

Thus, in Clausewitz's interpretation, war is also a cultural practice: communities project their own values, fears, and aims onto it. For this reason, war becomes, in an anthropological sense, a "mirror": not of destruction for its own sake, but of the extreme form of societies' self-expression and identity formation. When he writes that in war every nation acts "in accordance with its spirit, customs, and social condition", he indicates that armed forces carry their own social realities with them into conflicts.[35]

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century military anthropology – in the works of Ben-Ari (1998), Winslow (1999; 2004), McFate (2005), and Kilcullen (2009) – represents a further elaboration on this Clausewitzian legacy. War as a human space is not only a political, but also a cultural system of interactions: a network in which soldiers, civilians, local communities, and ideologies mutually shape one another.

Therefore, Clausewitz's legacy does not end in the 19th century: reinterpreted, his ideas continue to live on in the basic assumptions of military anthropology and in the investigation of the human, cultural, and moral nature of war.

THE TURN OF THE 19TH–20TH CENTURIES: THE ARMY AS A SOCIAL LABORATORY

By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the army was no longer merely an instrument of military power, but also a social and cultural institution. The emergence of nation-state armies radically transformed military life: military training, discipline, hierarchy, and collective identity took on new cultural forms. According to Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) analysis, the modern army is a "disciplinary institution" that regularly shapes bodies and wills in order to produce disciplined agents subordinated to the aims of society.[36]

31 Clausewitz 2013, I/7, translated into English by the author.
32 Clausewitz 2013, I.
33 Bourdieu 1977.
34 Boda 2016.
35 Clausewitz 2013, VIII, translated into English by the author.
36 Foucault 1975.

Military discipline does not consist merely of physical constraints. Foucault's concept of the "disciplined body" *(corps docile)* refers to the transformation of the body and the will, and to the reproduction of routines, rituals, and norms as the basis of military effectiveness.[37] In this way, the army becomes a cultural laboratory: training, marching, ranking, and common rituals all serve to shape the collective *habitus*.

Norbert Elias's (1897–1990) work *The Civilizing Process* similarly points out that military hierarchy and discipline constitute an experimental field for social norms and mechanisms of control.[38] In industrialising armies, discipline and self-control become cultural constructions that not only secure the internal order of the armed forces but also provide a model for a civilian society.

The experience of colonial armies made the role of culture in military success particularly salient. During colonial wars, soldiers were confronted with foreign cultures, customs, and religions. Understanding the behaviour of local communities became crucial for logistics, alliances, and military strategy.[39] On the basis of these experiences, one of the core ideas of modern military anthropology was formed: military action is always embedded in a specific cultural context.

The combination of an anthropological perspective and discipline enabled the army to exercise not only physical force but also cultural and psychological control. Military identity and loyalty were built through collective customs, rituals, and norms, which provided a starting point for modern anthropological investigations. Ben-Ari, for example, emphasises that the survival of the military community depends not only on the technical superiority of its weapons, but also on whether soldiers interpret their actions within a shared cultural and moral space.[40]

Overall, the turn of the 19th–20th centuries brought about the unfolding of the cultural and moral dimensions of the military organisation. Modern armies institutionalised the concepts of "disciplined body" and military *habitus,* while the experiences of colonial and international campaigns anticipated the later development of military anthropology, in which culture and human behaviour alike would become decisive factors in war – a process that can also be traced in 19th-century Central European and Hungarian debates on military virtues and obedience.[41]

THE EMERGENCE OF MODERN MILITARY ANTHROPOLOGY: COLD WAR AND POSTCOLONIALISM

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, the methods of social and cultural anthropology gradually entered the field of military studies, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Cold War context and postcolonial conflicts posed new challenges for military leadership: technological superiority no longer proved sufficient; success also required cultural intelligence and a deeper understanding of social relations.

37 Foucault 1975.
38 Elias 2004.
39 Boas 1911; Mead 1928.
40 Ben-Ari 1998.
41 Boda 2023, 99–116.

During this period, military anthropology as an analytical approach became an area of practical significance. Studying the rituals and group cohesion of Canadian airborne units, Winslow showed that military order and performance rest not only on rules and orders, but also on social rituals, beliefs, and shared experiences. In her analysis, she emphasises that the internal structures of military culture – rituals, symbols, and norms – play a key role in the functioning of the unit and the formation of military identity.[42]

Ben-Ari, drawing on examples from Israeli military units, demonstrated that conflict, emotional tension, and the understanding of the "other side" are fundamentally anthropological questions, critical both for military decision-making and survival. Soldiers are not merely armed units, but actors whose behaviour is shaped by social norms, beliefs, and customs.

In his research on postcolonial theatres, David Kilcullen argues that understanding the relationship between armed forces and local communities can provide a strategic advantage: in modern wars, the key to success lies in integrating cultural dimensions into operational planning. In Kilcullen's analyses, conflict is not simply a clash of armed forces, but an overlap of cultural, social, and psychological spaces, in which military power can only operate effectively if it takes these dimensions into account.[43]

Montgomery McFate similarly stresses that the lack of "cultural knowledge" can have serious consequences on the outcome of military operations: misunderstood local norms, alliances, and identities can undermine even the legitimacy of the military presence. Modern military anthropology is thus both scientifically and practically significant: it enables military science to examine human factors, cultural differences, and social structures systematically, and to understand the armed forces not merely as mechanical machines, but as cultural and social environments.

This scientific paradigm remains alive and relevant in the 21st century, particularly in complex conflicts such as those of the Sahel region, where military and social dimensions are closely intertwined. The toolkit of military anthropology makes it possible to integrate past and present experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the enduring regularities of human behaviour in conflict situations.[44]

In the 21st century, military anthropology has gained renewed relevance as armed forces increasingly operate in complex social and cultural environments shaped by irregular warfare, stabilisation missions, and civil–military interaction. Contemporary analyses of the operational environment point to the growing complexity of military missions, where cultural awareness and social understanding are increasingly important alongside traditional military capabilities.[45] Contemporary research further emphasizes that military effectiveness cannot be understood solely through technological superiority or doctrinal frameworks, but must account for cultural knowledge, social organisation, and local perceptions of authority and legitimacy.[46] Hungarian military scholarship has similarly highlighted the importance of integrating anthropological and social scientific perspectives into military

42 Winslow 1999.
43 Kilcullen 2005; 2009.
44 Winslow 1999; Ben-Ari 1998; Kilcullen 2005; McFate 2005.
45 Boldizsár 2014, 15–46.
46 Ben-Ari 1998; Winslow 1999; Kilcullen 2009.

thinking, particularly in relation to civil–military interaction and culturally informed operational planning.[47] In this sense, 21st-century military anthropology does not represent a break with earlier traditions of military thinking, but rather the systematic articulation of long-standing concerns regarding the human, cultural, and social dimensions of warfare.

THE ENDURING PERSPECTIVE OF MILITARY ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE EXAMPLE OF THE SAHEL REGION

Military anthropology is not merely a modern scholarly trend, but one of the oldest and most persistent ways of thinking about the human being, society, and conflict. From antiquity to the 21st century – from Plato and Xenophon through Caesar and Machiavelli to Clausewitz – military thinking has consistently addressed questions of human behaviour, social norms, and collective identity. Modern authors such as Winslow, Ben-Ari, Kilcullen, or McFate, in fact, reformulate this long tradition in the contemporary language of anthropology.[48]

In the 21st century, the toolkit of military anthropology has become particularly important in complex, multi-level conflicts. The example of the Sahel region – primarily Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso – clearly illustrates that security threats and local social structures are not isolated phenomena. In this region, insurgent and jihadist groups, local communities, national armies, regional coalitions, international forces, and civil organisations coexist within a dense cultural and political web, in which every military action is at the same time a social and cultural message.

Good examples are the French-led Serval and later Barkhane operations, as well as the UN MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali): soldiers arriving under different flags moved in the same geographical space, often among the same villages, yet the meanings attributed to them by the local population differed greatly. For local inhabitants, the military presence is not an abstract "stabilisation operation", but an everyday experience: who greets whom, who pays at the market, who speaks a local language, who appears closer to which community, and against whom the weapons are directed. Postcolonial sensitivities – particularly the perception of the French presence – further complicate the picture: operations led by the former colonial power carry one kind of meaning for the elite in Bamako, another for Tuareg communities, and yet another for rural populations along the Niger River.

In this environment, the application of military anthropology makes it possible for military decision-makers to focus not only on combat techniques and logistics but also on the norms, customs, and power structures of local society. McFate emphasises that integrating anthropological knowledge into military operations is not a luxury but a strategic necessity: the use of force can only be effective in the long term if it takes the cultural context into account. In the context of counterinsurgency operations, Kilcullen points out that understanding local networks, loyalties, and informal power structures is often more important than analysing classical rank structures and chains of command.

47 Sztankai 2014; 2024.

48 Winslow 1999; Ben-Ari 1998; Kilcullen 2005; McFate 2005.

In the Sahel region, conflicts are often underpinned by ethnic, religious, land-use, and regional factors: competition for resources between pastoral and farming communities, the historical burdens of centre–periphery relations, and the differing legitimacy of religious leaders and traditional chiefs. Understanding these structures is essential for developing sustainable security strategies. By analysing the behaviour, loyalties, and rituals of local communities, military anthropology helps minimise misunderstandings and the escalation of conflicts, while also supporting civil-military cooperation.[49]

In modern warfare, soldiers are not merely armed actors, but also cultural and social agents who influence community dynamics with every step they take. A patrol, a checkpoint, a house search, or even the distribution of aid is a performative act that the local population interprets according to its own categories: as guest, occupier, protector, rival, or ally. This perspective makes it possible to view military operations not only in technical, but also in humanistic terms. Ben-Ari points out that without understanding the human, social, and cultural dimensions of military actions, operations can easily turn into self-contradiction: short-term tactical successes may result in long-term political defeat if local social realities are ignored.

In summary, military anthropology is a new language for the dialogue between history, culture, and military science. The example of the Sahel region shows that, by linking past experience to present challenges, military strategy and human sciences can function in a mutually reinforcing way. The joint examination of military decisions, collective identity, and cultural context ensures that the armed forces are not only agents of violence, but also of knowledge and understanding of human beings – especially in those conflicts where security and social stability are inextricably intertwined.

The contemporary relevance of military anthropology lies in its ability to bridge cultural understanding and operational practice. As current military engagements – including those in regions such as the Sahel – demonstrate, armed forces increasingly rely on culturally informed analysis to navigate complex human and social environments. The historical cases discussed in this article show that similar modes of thinking existed long before the formal institutionalisation of military anthropology as a discipline. Recognizing this hidden tradition not only enriches the intellectual history of European military thinking but also reinforces the practical value of anthropological perspectives for modern military organisations operating in culturally sensitive contexts. In this sense, the article seeks to reconnect historical insight with contemporary military understanding.

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[49] Winslow 1999; Ben-Ari 1998; Kilcullen 2005.

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