The generals' art

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Sheila Dillon and Katherine E. Welch, editors

REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR IN ANCIENT ROME

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As a warrior state, ancient Rome was wisely and deliberately cautious about the presence of serving soldiers in the capital city itself. Roman armies conquered vast tracts of territory, from Scotland to the Sahara, and as far as Iraq in the East. It has been estimated that during the Republic, at least, a larger percentage of the Roman citizens was actively engaged in warfare than was ever the case in any other pre-industrial empire. The links between public prestige and military success were so strong that even the scholarly old Emperor Claudius was reduced to invading Britain to establish his credentials for the throne. Yet the city itself, within its sacred boundary or *pomerium*, was a strictly demilitarized zone: no soldiers under arms, nor even serving generals, were allowed in.

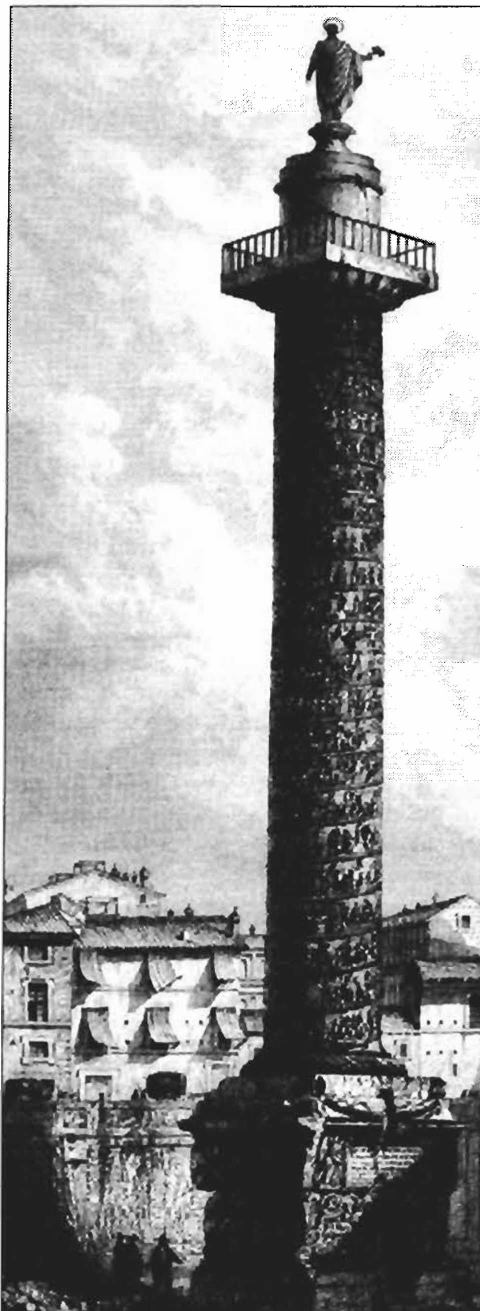
True, under the one-man-rule of the Empire, there was a small special militia stationed in the city: the Praetorian Guard, whose job it was to protect (or sometimes assassinate) the ruling emperor. And there were occasional outbreaks of civil war in which Roman armies ran amok in the historic centre; in the so-called Year of the Four Emperors (AD 69), for example, when rival claimants and their troops battled for the throne, fighting and associated arson destroyed even the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill. All the same, Rome did not indulge in the kind of military march-pasts and display of deadly hardware that is a feature of many modern states. There was not even a Roman equivalent of the anodyne pomp of Trooping the Colour or Remembrance Sunday. The only time that regular soldiers legitimately entered the city was to celebrate a triumph: the parade of booty and enemy prisoners that marked Rome's greatest victories (and, almost by definition, the end of a campaign). Though more frequent in the Republic, from the first century AD a triumph was a roughly once-in-twenty-years event.

This is not to suggest that visitors to ancient Rome would have missed the militaristic ethos of the society they were entering. It would have been impossible for anyone with their eyes open to have mistaken Rome for some proto-pacifist state (if any such ever existed). As *Representations of War in Ancient Rome* (edited by Sheila Dillon and Katherine E. Welch) underlines, instead of soldiers in flesh and blood, the place was full of images and memorials of fighting and conquest. The speaking platform in the Forum, known as the *rostra*, was named after the beaks or rams (*rostra*) of the captured enemy ships which were displayed on it. Spoils and enemy weapons were fixed to the outside of the houses of successful generals, as permanent reminders of their victories. It was said that once fixed these were never removed – unlikely in practice, but the ideal is significant enough. Statues of emperors often depicted them dressed for battle or in the act of conquering the enemy. The main thing missing from the famous equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius that used to stand in the centre of Michelangelo's piazza on the Capitoline (now in sheltered stabling within the nearby museum) is the figure of the prostrate barbarian over whom the Emperor was originally shown trampling. And all this is in addition to those detailed representations of military campaigns that still wind around the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius: visual accounts of Trajan's successful onslaught on the Dacians in the early second century AD, and of Marcus's massacres of assorted German tribes about half a century later.

The functions of this profusion of images of war are fairly clear, in broad terms. As I have already suggested, it was a far safer option to parade military power in marble or bronze than to take the risks that came with the presence in the capital of armed troops, however impressive or useful they might have been. The Romans' emphatic split between the demilitarized centre and the zone of military activity which was by definition outside Rome itself (a split nicely reflected in the standard Latin phrase for "at home and abroad", *domi militiaeque*) by and large served their homeland security well. The bouts of civil war in the capital may have been very bloody, but they were relatively infrequent.

Yet there were other factors at play too. These images had a crucial role in linking the increasingly distant theatres of war with the world of the metropolis. Well before the first century BC, the extent of Rome's territory meant that the vast majority of military campaigns took place well out of the view of the city's population. Already in the mid-second century, Polybius – the Greek historian of Rome's rise to power, who was a long-term resident-cum-hostage in the city – claimed that the purpose of a triumphal parade was to bring before the eyes of the Roman people at home the deeds of their generals overseas (triumphs displayed paintings of the conflict, as well as the loot). The sculptures on, say, the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius did something similar: they gave to the people in the city, few of whom by the imperial period had ever witnessed a military operation, a vision of themselves as part of an imperialist enterprise. In that sense, it is perhaps not unlike the function of the shipping forecast on British public radio: few of us actually need to know the strength of wind at South Utsire, but it is important that we should remember that we live on an island and are at the mercy of the waves.

There was also a point in these monuments of war for the individual Roman general. As Tonio Hölscher argues in an astute chapter in *Representations of War*, one of the biggest challenges for the Roman elite was to convert military victory far away into bankable political capital at home. The mechanism of that conversion was very often building and other forms of visual display in the city. From the fourth century BC, successful generals channelled the profits of their spoils into temples – thank-offerings to the gods, which would also act as permanent reminders of their own achievements. Later, cash would be channelled into monuments even more directly associated with public entertainment. The Colosseum originally displayed inscriptions (or so the latest reconstruction of the text would have us believe) declaring that it had been built with the spoils that came from the Emperor Vespasian's victory over the Jews. Even before the age of the emperors, Pompey the Great's military profits went to building the first ever permanent theatre in the city of Rome, crowned by a temple of Venus Victrix (Venus "Giver of Victory") and linked to porticoes and parklands where the art works he had looted were displayed. As if to emphasize the connection between this vast architectural development and Pompey's military success, the shows which inaugurated the theatre almost certainly mimicked the triumphal parade which he had choreographed some years earlier. The inaugural play, on the subject of Agamemnon's return



Trajan's Column, a nineteenth-century engraving by James Tibbetts Willmore after Piranesi

from Troy, most likely featured wagon-loads of Pompey's spoils which had already been trundled through the streets in triumph. We can only wonder how many people interpreted the implied parallel between Pompey and the cuckold (and murdered) Agamemnon as a rather black omen.

So far, so good. But scratch the surface of this approach, and the problems become a little trickier. For a start, what in Rome is to count as part of "the art of war"? The contributors to *Representations of War* seem to have in mind a capacious definition: of course including the images that depict successful Roman campaigns and the temples and monuments built explicitly out of the spoils; but also, among other things, the "original" Greek art that ended up in Rome as a result of the conquest of Greece, as well as the hyper-realistic ("veristic") style of Roman portraiture, warts and all, which evoked the qualities of good generalship and military distinction. An ingenious but not entirely convincing chapter by Laura S. Klar, for example, argues that the distinctive form of the stage facade, or *scaenae frons*, in the Roman theatre (tall, and in contrast to the Greek equivalent, articulated with columns and niches) can be explained by its derivation from the temporary theatrical displays of victorious generals – the niches originally designed to show off the precious statues that were regularly a large part of the booty of conquest. Maybe. But on this view all Roman art risks coming under the rubric of "the art of war", if for no other reason than the fact that, directly or indirectly, the profits of military victory paid for it. By that token, all Athenian art of the fifth century BC would also be defined as "the art of war", not to mention a good deal of the artistic tradition of Western Europe.

There are more specific difficulties too – notably about the significance and documentary realism of some of the most famous monuments. Do they, or do they not, give an accurate impression of Roman conduct in battle? It is clear enough that a statue of a mounted Emperor trampling a barbarian underfoot is more plausibly seen as an iconic representation of autocratic imperial power than as a snapshot of the Emperor's behaviour. But the detailed visual narratives of the columns of Trajan and Marcus are not so easy to categorize. It has long been recognized that they each portray a very different style of warfare. Trajan's column downplays the atrocious side of military conflict. With a few exceptions (including a puzzling scene in which a group of women appear to attack naked captives with flaming torches), the war against the Dacians proceeds with a ruthless dignity – more or less abiding by the ancient equivalent of the Geneva Convention. Marcus's column offers a much nastier vision, often centred (as Sheila Dillon's chapter, "Women on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus", stresses) on the mistreatment of women in the war zone, who are assaulted, dragged off by their hair, stabbed and killed. One notorious scene seems to show a soldier grabbing a young child from its mother: a "war crime" in the eyes of several modern commentators (though intriguingly read as a playful "joke" by one, not very playful, nineteenth-century student of the monument).

Why the difference? Some have argued that the reasons are essentially stylistic. The column of Trajan, they insist, still falls, just, within the period of high classicism, with all its rhetoric of restraint; fifty or so years later, that of Marcus already shows signs of the emotional intensity of the post-classical or early medieval world. Others have proposed a real difference between the two campaigns. Paul Zanker, for example, puts the sharply contrasting treatment of the women down to the different aims of the wars: Trajan was conquering Dacia to turn it into a regular province ("peaceful coexistence" being the ultimate aim); Marcus was quashing an invasion of barbarians, to whom no quarter was to be given. Dillon, rightly in my view, feels uneasy with the realist explanation; both wars were probably equally violent. She tries instead to focus on the message to the Roman viewer. Trajan was fighting in a period when

memories of the Year of the Four Emperors and of the armies' atrocities during it were still raw; the aim of the images of the disciplined army, engaged in its wholesome activities of wood-clearing, bridge-building, sacrifice and the like, was to underscore the discipline and moderation of the Trajanic regime more generally. The violence, particularly against women, portrayed on the other column, was intended to mobilize a different image of male Roman imperial power, and to reassure the Roman viewer that, with the massacre of the German women and children, their "victory would extend into the next generation". This is convincing – up to a point. But, how far it, or any other of the more ambitious interpretations of the columns, stands up against the fact that these visual narratives were virtually invisible from the ground, I am not sure.

Representations of War is an engaging, well-illustrated and timely collection of essays. Almost inevitably it has much to contribute to the study of ancient warfare itself, as well as to the study of its artistic (and literary) representations. The final essay in the volume, a sharp contribution by William V. Harris on the "Narrative Literature of Roman Courage", poses hard questions about Roman military behaviour as well as about its literary versions. Why were the Romans so committed to war? How did they promote the required courage – or, more simply, stop the "poor bloody infantry" running away? What were psychological roots to such unremitting militarism? Most of the other contributors touch on these questions too, even if fleetingly. The Romans do not come well out of their answers. It is here that the book is at its weakest. Roman armies appear alternately, and somewhat self-contradictorily, as "frenzied" mobs driven by blood lust, and brutally efficient, well-trained war machines (frenzy and efficiency are not usually partners in crime). At the same time, Roman conduct is supposed to plumb even lower depths of cruelty than is the norm for antiquity. "Greeks might kill the adult male population and sell the women and children into slavery. But this was not always the case", observes Welch in her introduction – congratulating the Greeks, while implying, quite wrongly, that Romans always did indulge in such atrocities.

Even more to the point, Roman culture in general is painted as if it was univocally and enthusiastically supportive of a narrowly military ethos and of the political capital it might bring. There is hardly a mention of the subversive voices of the Latin poets who challenged that military ideal; and only brief reference to Tacitus's devastating criticism of some of the worst excesses of Roman butchery. There is nothing at all on those works of art which also might offer a discordant view. I am not thinking here so much of Augustus' famous "Altar of Peace" (for which "Altar of Successful Pacification" might be a better title). But the famous statue of the "Dying Gaul" (probably once on display in the pleasure gardens of Julius Caesar himself) wonderfully encapsulates the noble death of a barbarian, and hints at a view of Rome's enemies closer to Tacitus and the poets than to the authors of this book.

In the end, the Romans were less monochrome, and more interesting, than *Representations of War* allows. If the contributors had reflected harder on the Romans' own doubts, subversions and self-criticism they would have done the Romans more justice, and made an even better book.

How it absolutely was

J. COLEMAN

George Garnett

MARSILIUS OF PADUA AND "THE TRUTH OF HISTORY"
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Setting itself in opposition to much, but not all, contemporary Anglo-American scholarship, this very good book on the fourteenth-century political theorist Marsilius of Padua situates the author and his best-known work, the *Defensor Pacis* (Defender of Peace, 1324), in his own times. George Garnett's Marsilius is not to be seen as having transcended his age, nor should he be interpreted as a secular political theorist with proto-democratic intentions, nor was he a forerunner to Renaissance republicanism. Those readers who are already familiar with the historical and religious tensions of this period will find much to appreciate in Garnett's book. He shows, for example, precisely why Marsilius was judged notorious in his own times, and deemed heretical by popes, whatever different spin was put on his work in later centuries. Garnett's running analysis draws extensively from the second of the three Discourses of the *Defensor Pacis*, because the list of Marsilius's heretical errors was taken largely from here, rather than from the first Discourse, which so many other scholars have analysed before.

However, Garnett uses the work of an earlier generation of Continental historians to show that Marsilius was a "Romanist" who dedicated his work to Ludwig of Bavaria, the German Holy Roman Emperor, and hence he was defending an imperial position against the claims of the contemporary papacy and its interpretation of power over material temporalities and governance throughout Europe.

Marsilius's notoriety stemmed from his view that the Holy Roman Emperor could correct, punish, institute and depose the pope, and that all priests, regardless of position, have equal authority and jurisdiction by Christ's institution, thereby replacing what he thought was the misguided reconstruction of church history that had created hierarchies of power in the Church itself. In attempting to show from a re-reading of church history that no pope was ever given the power to inflict coercive punishments on anyone, without imperial authority, and that a General Council of the Church which represented all true believers could not err in its interpretation of Scripture – because this Council, and not some hierarchy of bishops, was inspired by the Holy Spirit – Marsilius placed himself in a position that even other contemporary pro-imperialists could not accept. Garnett reveals how virtually all of his contemporaries were shocked by his "demonstrations" that the papacy's claims to "the plenitude of power" were "fantastic, malignant dreams". Marsilius's own readings of early church history and Scripture were meant to prove how inaccurate and dangerous papal claims had become, and how they were, therefore, the very cause of civil strife. According to Marsilius, the crux came with the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century.

Marsilius provides elaborate, sometimes bizarre, interpretations of what happened then and "next" in an effort to explain how coercive power in history came to encompass a uniquely temporal domain. In adopting an apocalyptic reading of the struggle between popes and emperors of preceding millennia, indeed from the very Fall of Man, Marsilius provides his "true history" to replace what he believes has been a singularly perverse history of false opinions advanced by early bishops in their own desire for earthly governance, *principatus*, which they wrongly assumed had been given them by Christ.

The argument is complicated, but, using the text, Garnett shows how Marsilius tackled the issue of coercive governance, *principatus*, before Christianity and after Christ's appearance. Coercive government was instigated by God, in Moses and subsequent judges, or as a remote cause through men's own free choice. But with Christ's new evangelical law, a law of grace, there came to be no coercive sanction in this world but only in a future life. The shift from Old to New Testament precepts and counsels meant that now, in history, the observance of the evangelical law was voluntary. The consequence was that coercion could not assist anyone to salvation and eternal life. Politically, this meant that the reduction of post-lapsarian man's contentious acts to due equality and proportion in the present life can only come through human laws that are actively consented to by the sovereign people, what Marsilius calls the Human Legislator. On this view, after Christ's incarnation, God no longer directly ordained laws with coercive sanction in this world as he had in the Mosaic law. Laws, now, are made by men alone and such laws require a guardian and executor. The executor of the laws is the *pars principans*, the prince, of any "temperate" regime.

Since law, now, is an expression of men's free wills, it issues without any mediation from the decisions of the human mind of the members of the *populus romanus*, the Roman people, everywhere. It is the people, as a congregation of the faithful, a *universitas fidelium*, but when in civic mode as the Human Legislator, the *universitas civium*, who "elect" priests as office holders of the regime. And such priestly office holders have no coercive powers. They act only as advisers to the faithful because they are learned in divine law. Priests therefore cannot and do not excommunicate anyone. But as Marsilius indicates, with increasingly perfect Christian communities of men, such excommunication can come about precisely because excommunication has civic consequences. Those with the power to excommunicate constitute the members of the Human Legislator in any community. Marsilius has removed the power of excommunication from priests and shifted it to the civic community.

Garnett thinks that the famous English translation of *Defensor Pacis* by Alan Gewirth has flaws sufficient to make it almost useless. This reviewer disagrees, despite the possible problem with translating *regnum* and *civitas* as "state". Gewirth's older two-volume translation and commentary, when read against the Latin editions, is still the translation that advanced students should use. Because Garnett has set himself the project of what Marsilius judged to be the truth of history, he spends less time than this reviewer thought necessary on the theological positions of contemporary Franciscans with whom Marsilius agreed and had contact. We learn rather late of the influence of the Spiritual Franciscans, those radicals in the Franciscan Order who experienced such turmoil during the early fourteenth century. For Garnett it is Marsilius's apocalyptic providentialism, something that was shared in no small part by radical Franciscans, that served not only his re-reading of church history but also as a clarion call for all to recognize the nature of the crisis across Europe. Marsilius's intentions are shown from his words in Discourse two to have been a call for reform of the relations between the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy, along the notorious lines outlined, if tranquillity is to be achieved.

George Garnett's book is enlightening and informative about what fourteenth-century thinkers were, in context, really discussing. It is also an often amusing retelling of an immensely complicated story.

Siesta

In Greece all spring and into the long summer
and fall each morning sun was like a hammer.
Long siestas, shutters tightly shut,
could not entirely keep the presence out
which pushed and throbbed, insistent as a gong.
Each new day tried; but well before each noon,
dawn's fragile fragrance dwindled like a dream.

Trying to dull the glare and ease the din
thirty years later, doggedly I draw
the curtains. But what now comes muscling in
is not a javelin of Aegean light
but a massed chorus roaring at the gate.
And mine is one more voice that swells the throng
shouting life's endless and relentless song.

RACHEL HADAS