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WAR IN LATE ANTIQUITY

A Social History

A. D. Lee
For James, Philip, and Naomi
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The military history of late antiquity has received significant attention in the last decade, notably in monographs by Hugh Elton, Geoffrey Greatrex, Martijn Nicasie, and John Haldon, as well as in important series of papers by scholars such as Peter Brennan, James Howard-Johnston, Philip Rance, Frank Trombley, Michael Whitby, and Constantine Zuckerman. The focus of much of this work, particularly the first three monographs, has been on strategy, tactics, and army structures – in other words, military history as usually understood. The monographs have also concentrated on discrete periods within late antiquity – so, Nicasie on the fourth century, Elton on the fourth and early fifth, and Greatrex on the early sixth. Haldon covers a more diverse range of subject matter, but since his primary concern is medieval Byzantine warfare, late antiquity receives attention only with respect to conditions in the later sixth and early seventh century.

While there are inevitably some points of overlap with elements of these studies (perhaps most obviously in Chapter 3), this book endeavors to follow a different overall trajectory. First, its concern is not with strategy, tactics, or campaigns per se, but rather with war in its wider social context, where “social” is interpreted in a very broad sense, as encompassing the political, economic, social, and religious dimensions of the late Roman empire – in other words, the ways in which warfare and the army impinged on “non-military” aspects of life. Secondly, it aims to deal with these topics across late antiquity as a whole, from the mid third to the early seventh century.

Needless to say, the volume’s remit is potentially vast and I am conscious that there are subjects which might legitimately be included in a social history of war during late antiquity which do not feature here or have been dealt with more cursorily than they perhaps deserve. Moreover, the perspective adopted is primarily that of the empire, with only limited attention being given to the empire’s neighbors, for whom the available sources are much more limited. The subjects which are treated here, however, are all ones which I consider to be of central importance to a rounded understanding of the wider impact of war and the Roman army in late antiquity, and I hope my discussion of them offers new insights not only into warfare and military institutions in this period, but also into many other aspects of the period, in
ways which will be of interest to those who might not otherwise normally concern themselves with military history.

Numerous people have helped, in ways great and small, to bring this project to completion. Of fundamental importance has been the grant of a semester’s leave by the School of Humanities at the University of Nottingham, and the provision of a second semester’s leave through the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Study Leave scheme. I am particularly grateful to Peter Garnsey, Michael Whitby, and Peter Elford for their help in securing the latter, and to the AHRC for the funding which covered replacement teaching for a semester. My heartfelt thanks to John Drinkwater, who read a substantial number of draft chapters on which he offered invaluable detailed comment, as also to Mary McIntosh and David Noy for their helpful suggestions on drafts of the final chapter. I am also grateful to the two anonymous readers for Blackwell whose constructive feedback helped to improve the final text.

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PREFACE

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