

# The imperial roots of Merovingian military organization

Since the mid-nineteenth century early medieval military history has been reduced to a rather simple formula. Prior to the Middle Ages warfare in Western Europe was dominated by the highly trained and well organized infantry legions of the Roman empire. Then for several hundred years, the barbarians, who either are credited or blamed for destroying the Roman empire and creating the so-called 'Dark Ages', fought according to the tribal customs that they had brought with them from the German forests. These barbarians, who were gathered into embarrassingly small armed groups (much imagination has been expended trying to explain how they managed to conquer the Roman empire) putatively fought each other in an ongoing search for greater and greater amounts of plunder and the 'irrational' pursuit of glory. Warfare, as commonly understood in Western civilization on the basis of a Greco-Roman model, is believed ostensibly to have ceased to exist among these barbarians.

It is clear, however, that today the historiographical construct 'Dark Ages' is dead. The successor states of the empire are seen accurately as Romano-German polities.<sup>1</sup> Those who would still conjure up early medieval stateless polities<sup>2</sup> as analogues of America's non-literate 'Red Indians' or sub-Sahara's warrior nomads,<sup>3</sup> have seriously misunderstood the early Middle Ages in general, and early medieval military organization, strategy and tactics in particular.<sup>4</sup>

In military terms it has long been demonstrated that the institutions that were developed during the later Roman empire provide the proper background for the study of most of Western Europe and especially Gaul during the early Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Neither the primitives so artfully constructed by Tacitus in his *Germania* nor the legions so carefully described by Caesar in his *Opera* are of importance to the study

either of late antique or of early medieval military organization and warfare.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, it is important to emphasize four closely related military developments that took place during the later empire. Following the crash of the third century, the imperial government decided to pursue a grand strategy that we have come to characterize as 'defense in depth'. This required the radical transformation of the cities of the later Roman empire into 'hardened' centers of military strength which had four interrelated military functions: 1. supply depots; 2. control points at key land and water routes; 3. coordination of rear area security and intelligence; and 4. self-contained strongholds with mobile field forces.<sup>7</sup> The quibbling criticisms<sup>8</sup> that have followed in the wake of Luttwak's magisterial thesis now have been dismantled effectively.<sup>9</sup>

In order to implement this strategy of defense in depth a massive program of fortifying a vast number of the cities and lesser habitation centers of the empire was carried out with great vigor.<sup>10</sup> These efforts in military construction were continued through the greater part of the fourth century.<sup>11</sup> The walls existed as a major factor not only in everyday life but they also played a significant role in future military strategy and tactics.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Isidore of Seville, writing during the early seventh century called attention to the crucial role of such fortifications in his *Etymologies*, when he wrote: "A city is made by its walls".<sup>13</sup>

The vast material changes in the military topography of the empire brought about by the fortification of the *urbes* and lesser fortifications, led, as the imperial government intended, to the dominance of siege warfare.<sup>14</sup> The building of the walls was intended, in large part, to thwart the efforts of the so-called 'barbarians' from beyond the frontiers in their efforts to loot

1. Delbrück 1982; Oman 1924; Lot 1946.
2. Werner 1984; Durlia 1990; Goffart 1980; Bachrach 1994b, 1995b.
3. Werner 1984; Durlia 1990; Goffart 1988; Bachrach 1994b, 1995b; Murray 1983, 1988.
4. Auer 1991.
5. Leyser 1979; Keegan 1993.
6. Bachrach 1994b.
7. Bachrach 1972; Bradbury 1992; Anderson 1995.
8. Bachrach 1970b, 1972; Murray 1988; Anderson 1995.
9. Luttwak 1976:132-134, outlines five major elements. However, it would seem reasonable to suggest that Luttwak's point five, i.e. conservation of the strength of mobile forces, can reasonably be subsumed under point four.
10. e.g. Isaacs 1990; Whitaker 1989.
11. Wheeler 1993.
12. Luttwak 1976:126-190; Bachrach 1995b.
13. Johnson 1983; Petrikovits 1971; Butler 1959; Grenier 1934; Brühl 1975, 1990; Blanchet 1907; Février 1973; Hubert 1959.
14. Bradbury 1992; Bachrach 1993b.
15. xv,ii,1.
16. Bradbury 1992; Harrison; Bachrach 1994a.

and ravage the cities of the empire. In this context Ammianus Marcellinus tells his readers that the Visigothic ruler Fritigern, “[S]eeing that his men, who were ignorant of the manner in which to conduct a siege and were experiencing serious casualties,” warned “be at peace with the walls....”<sup>17</sup>

As imperial military commentators saw the matter, learning how to deal with fortifications was the *sine qua non* for being civilized in military terms.<sup>18</sup> The younger Merobaudes, a Romano-Frankish general and author, observed that the “Teutons whom Caesar had fought had only a crude command of warfare and were inexperienced in its developed art.” However, the newcomers learned “the mature skills of the art of warfare” after their settlement within the empire. This education consisted, in large part, of learning how to defend and build great stone fortifications.<sup>19</sup>

Contemporary with imperial measures to fortify the cities of the empire was the accelerated militarization of the civilian population throughout the Roman world.<sup>20</sup> This process was driven, in part, by the need to have militia forces available to man the walls of the newly fortified centers of population. Thus, for example, the legislation establishing urban militia forces was already very well in train by 440 when the Emperor Valentinian III clarified the existing situation with regard to matters at Rome in the following manner: “We decree... that all are to know...that no Roman citizen or member of a guild is to be compelled to do [expeditionary] military service. Indeed, he is required to do armed service only on the walls and at the gates [for the defense of the city] whenever the necessity arises. The regulations made by the Illustrious Prefect of the City are to be obeyed by all.”<sup>21</sup>

Siege warfare, which is manpower intensive, required large numbers of militia troops to defend the wall. However, even greater numbers of effectives were needed to invest the empire’s new fortress cities when they fell into enemy hands.<sup>22</sup> Finally, as noted above, the so-called barbarians, who came to attack or to settle in the empire, were required to learn the sophisticated techniques and discipline, from logistics to the building and operation of machines, that undergirded siege warfare.<sup>23</sup>

The focus of war in Merovingian Gaul was upon gaining control of and holding the *civitates* with their fortified *urbes*. The *civitates* were the fundamental units of political, military, economic, and religious organization during the Roman empire and continued to play this

role throughout the Middle Ages and even beyond.<sup>24</sup> The prizes of diplomacy and by extension of war were viable *civitates* with their highly developed economic resources of a rural nature as well as their fortified *urbes*.

These cities also served as the administrative capital, religious center, and focus for commercial activity within each administrative region. Campaign strategy, and to a lesser extent battle tactics, recognized the primary importance of keeping the destruction of both people and resources to a minimum and of avoiding unnecessary damage when possible. Massacred farmers and artisans, burned buildings, devastated vineyards, broken canals, and destroyed bridges merely undermined the value of victory as taxes would fall in arrears and productivity would slump.<sup>25</sup> The unjustified emphasis on military destruction and disaster in Merovingian Gaul found in the *History* of Gregory of Tours, our most important and influential source, is due to the bishop’s overwhelming bias against secular society, in general, and military matters in particular.<sup>26</sup>

In Gaul, the Merovingian rulers, with the help of their Gallo-Roman advisers, maintained when possible the military structures that they had acquired from the later Roman empire. Thus, the military forces of Clovis and his successors were drawn from a vast variety of ethnic groups, e.g. Gallo-Romans, Alans, Saxons, and Taifals. These forces were organized in a bewildering congeries of institutional structures from military colonies of various sorts to urban garrisons, general levies and select levies.<sup>27</sup>

Procopius, writing toward the mid-sixth century, describes in considerable detail the fate of one group, perhaps *limitanei*, that had been serving in Armorica and subsequently was amalgamated into Clovis’s armies.<sup>28</sup> Procopius writes: “[T]hey handed themselves over along with their military standards and the lands that they had been guarding for the Romans for a long time to the *Arborychoi* [Armoricans] and to the Germans [Merovingian Franks].” These Roman soldiers, Procopius continues, “handed down to their offspring all of their fathers’ customs....and this people held them in reverence...even up to my time.”<sup>29</sup>

The Roman legacy, physical, institutional and human, that the leaders in Merovingian Gaul, who made military policy or grand strategic decisions, inherited, they modified over time in response to their perception of contemporary conditions.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, throughout the Merovingian era and, indeed, for a very long time thereafter the walls that had been

built following the crash of the third century not only survived throughout the Middle Ages. Indeed, the walls continued more often than not and in more places than in fewer to be maintained in defensible condition.<sup>31</sup>

Thus in Gaul, some eighty per cent of the one hundred and fifteen *urbes* that are listed in the *Notitia Galliarum* were drastically reduced in size and became the beneficiaries of massive walls which averaged ten meters in height and four meters in thickness at the base. These fortifications were generally strengthened with equally massive towers, that on average were placed at twenty-five meter intervals along the walls, and by elaborate fortifications to protect the gates. This entire complex was usually further reinforced with an internal citadel, i.e. the *arx* or *praetorium*. Finally, in order to enhance the defenses, it was not uncommon to have ditches dug around the walls which were then filled with water by having nearby streams or rivers diverted.<sup>32</sup>

In this context, Gregory of Tours's description, in his *History*, of the fortress town of Dijon is worth quoting: "It is a fortified place with very strong walls built in the middle of a plain....Four gates face the four corners of the earth and thirty three-towers guard the [circuit] walls. These towers are built of squared stones to a height of twenty feet and above these are courses of small stones. The total height of the walls comes to thirty feet and they have a thickness of fifteen feet."<sup>33</sup>

The overpowering presence of the Roman fortresses assured that sieges would dominate warfare both at the strategic and at the tactical level. Thus, the centrality of siege warfare which focussed upon the *urbes* of Gaul during the early Middle Ages is massively documented.<sup>34</sup> For example, Clovis's conquest, during the later fifth and early sixth centuries, of what is now the greater part of France, was based upon the ability of his armies to capture great fortress cities such as Verdun, Paris, Avignon, Albi, Rodez, Clermont, Bordeaux, Toulouse, and Angoulême.<sup>35</sup>

The siege, or, at least, the threat of a siege, dominated warfare, but like war, in general, intelligent commanders undertook such operations only when diplomacy failed. Gregory of Tours makes an effort to illustrate this by showing how a Gallo-Roman magnate named Aridius explained the relation between diplomacy and war to Clovis while the Merovingian ruler already was besieging the massive fortress city of Avignon. Thus Aridius begins by asking rhetorically: "Why do you keep this army in the field

when your enemy is ensconced in this exceptionally strong place?" Aridius then goes on to observe: "You depopulate the fields [of their animals], consume the meadows, hack down the vines, fell the olive trees, and all the fruits of this region you completely destroy." Nevertheless you still "do not prevail against your enemy."<sup>36</sup>

Gregory then depicts Aridius suggesting a presumably more attractive and obviously more traditional option to Clovis. Thus, rather than continuing to impose such destruction on the countryside, Clovis is advised that he should send a delegation to King Gondobad and offer terms by which the Burgundian ruler will agree to pay "a yearly tribute to you so that he may save the region." Then Aridius explains, "You will be the lord [and] the tribute will be paid in perpetuum." Gregory then explains that Clovis accepted the principles embodied in this advice.<sup>37</sup>

When Clovis's sons, grandsons, and great grandsons fought their exhausting civil wars, the *urbes* remained the focus of their military activity, both strategically and tactically.<sup>38</sup> For example, prior to the beginning of the campaigning season of 584, Gregory of Tours recounts in his *History* that King Chilperic of Neustria obtained intelligence that his brother, King Guntram of Burgundy, and his nephew, Childebert II of Austrasia, had formed an alliance. Information on this pact was followed by intelligence that Childebert had mustered an army, ostensibly for a campaign in Spain, but which Chilperic would appear to have believed was intended to attack him. Indeed, any Austrasian invasion of Spain very likely would have to pass through Neustrian territory. Consequently, Chilperic sent messengers to sound the alarm to his generals and to the counts in each of the cities of his *regnum*. He ordered these officers to repair the walls of the cities and to bring their troops and resources within the defenses in order to withstand a siege. Chilperic, himself, mustered an army and kept it in the field under his direct command.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the meager description of these events provided by Gregory, it is clear that Chilperic was employing a defense in depth strategy. His well defended cities – not only did he order the walls to be repaired but the generals and counts were instructed to bring their field forces within the fortifications – were to be used as strategic 'hardpoints' which the enemy could not easily overwhelm. Chilperic, himself, stayed in the field with an army that could be brought up quickly against any force that was besieging one of his cities.

17. Bk. XXXI, ch. 6, para 4.
18. Bachrach 1995b.
19. Lines 144-151.
20. Bachrach 1993a.
21. Nov. Val. V.2.
22. Bachrach and Aris 1990; Bachrach 1994a.
23. Bachrach 1993b; Bachrach 1994a.
24. Bachrach 1995b.
25. Ibid.
26. Goffart 1988.
27. Bachrach 1972.
28. Bachrach 1970b, 1972; Anderson 1995; cf. Poly. 29. 1963:2.64ff; cf. 1919:5.2ff.
30. Bachrach 1970a, 1972; Anderson 1995.
31. Johnson 1983; Brühl 1975, 1990; Février 1973; Hubert 1959.
32. Ibid. and Petrikovits 1971; Butler 1959; Griener 1934; Blanchet 1907.
33. Bk. III, ch. 19.
34. Bachrach 1972; Bradbury 1992.
35. Bachrach 1972:1-17.
36. Bk. II, ch. 32.
37. Bk. II, ch. 32. N.b. this conversation may never have taken place and it is unlikely that even if it had taken place that Gregory recorded it verbatim. However, it is important that Gregory wants to convey to his readers that Clovis accepted the validity of such diplomatic and strategic thinking and that it was "Roman" thinking as personified by Aridius.
38. Bachrach 1972:18-73; Bachrach 1994c:119-148.
39. Bk. VI, ch. 41.

Should an enemy force refuse to raise its siege, the fortified hardpoint served as the potential anvil in Chilperic's strategy and his field army as the hammer. According to such a plan any besieging force would be caught between the two and seriously discomforted. In addition, because field forces had been brought into the cities and could reinforce the urban militia forces on the walls, the fortifications would be very difficult to capture by storm. Finally, these regular troops could sortie from the defenses and in coordination with Chilperic's army catch the besieging army in a pincer movement with the immense tactical advantage such a deployment enjoyed.

There is a clear indication that a defense in depth strategy was put in place. This is provided by the recognition, reported by Gregory in the *History*, that both Chilperic and his commanders understood that their unprotected assets in the countryside would be at risk and likely would be seriously damaged invading army. Thus, the king guaranteed to his officers that whatever assets that might be lost would be replaced to their profit. The recognition that unprotected and unprotectable assets are to be sacrificed in the short term is a key aspect of a defense in-depth strategy.<sup>45</sup>

The importance of the great fortress cities remained a significant strategic and tactical constant when effective control of the government passed from the Merovingian *roi fainéants* to the Carolingian mayors of the palace and other great regional magnate families. Thus, for example, Charles Martel besieged Avignon twice and Narbonne once all in 737.<sup>46</sup> In Aquitaine, the independent dukes, Eudo and Waiofar, based their entire strategy upon control of the great fortress cities of the region. Waiofar's ultimate failure to defend these against Charles Martel's son, Peppin, in fact, sounded the death knell of Aquitanian independence.<sup>47</sup>

The militarization of the population, that had been accelerated by the building of fortress cities, thoroughly informed Merovingian military organization. In Gaul each able bodied male, whether free or unfree, was required to provide service in the locally based militia for the defense of the region in which he lived. These men played the primary role in defending the walls of the city in which they lived.<sup>48</sup> In addition, those men, who lived in or near one or another of the many other fortifications that dotted the countryside, were trained to defend the walls of these *castra*, *castella*, or lesser strongholds.<sup>49</sup> This aspect of a general military

obligation was not confined to the Merovingian kingdoms but was ubiquitous in Rome's successor states. For example, the Anglo-Saxon analogue to the Merovingian local militia was the great *fyrð*.<sup>45</sup>

Civilians of sufficient means, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, had military obligations that went well beyond participation in the local defense, i.e. they were called upon for expeditionary service.<sup>46</sup> These men were required not only to provide for their arms, armor, and transport but also to sustain their food costs for three months and clothing costs for six months of campaigning each year.<sup>47</sup> This aspect of a wealth-based military obligation was, like the general levy, a ubiquitous feature of military organization in Rome's successor states. For example, the Anglo-Saxon analogue was the "select *fyrð*".<sup>48</sup>

From a numerical perspective, the militarized civilian population throughout Gaul provided the overwhelming majority of the armed forces for local defense and also the rank and file of the armies that carried out major offensive operations which were aimed at permanent conquest. However, these part-time militia units were significantly strengthened both for local defense and while on *expeditio* by the addition of units of professional troops. These latter forces were organized in a vast variety of ways. First and foremost among the professional soldiers were the armed followers who served in the king's household, i.e. the analogue of the emperor's *praesentales*. Other members of the royal army were established with their families in military colonies or as garrisons in local strongholds, and sometimes even on lands of their own.<sup>49</sup>

Other important men in society, lay and clerical alike, commonly supported a military household in accord with what, as seen above, was the imperial tradition. The importance of the armed following was well understood in the Roman empire and flourished in Rome's successor states. For example, the great Byzantine general Belisarius, a contemporary of Clovis's sons, is reported by a contemporary on his staff to have had 7,000 effectives in his military household. Most of the members of such a *Gefolgschaft*, like the *praesentales* of the emperor, served in the household of the man who supported them.<sup>50</sup> During the period of transition from direct imperial rule to the derivative constitutions of Rome's successor states in the West, the episcopate gradually became one of the dominant elements in local government.<sup>51</sup> Thus, important ecclesiastics played a key role

in the military organization of Merovingian Gaul. Usually each bishop supported a military component in his *familia* or household. They also had the responsibility for seeing to it that their dependents, both free and unfree, performed service in the general levy.<sup>52</sup>

Towards the latter part of the ninth century Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims, who is to be considered one of the most ferocious defender of church rights during the early Middle Ages, attempted to codify the long-standing military obligations that were owed to the state by the church. Thus, he made it clear that according to custom a full two-fifths, i.e. forty per cent, of episcopal income as well as of the income that was collected by other religious institutions was to be made available to the government for the defense of the *res publica*.<sup>53</sup>

The requirement that the walls of the great fortress cities and of the lesser population centers be manned in wartime undoubtedly played a crucial role in accelerating the militarization of the civilian population. Indeed, proper defense required that one man defend approximately four feet of wall.<sup>54</sup> Thus, for example, the 2,900 meter circuit walls of Bourges<sup>55</sup> required a defense force of something in excess of 2,350 local militia men. Conversely, an attacking force, in order to pose a credible threat to storm the walls, had to have at least a four to one numerical advantage over the defenders.<sup>56</sup> Thus, for example, if Bourges were to be defended simply by its local militia, as estimated above, an attacking force in the order of magnitude of 10,000 effectives would be required in order to create a credible threat to storm the walls. These calculations remained valid throughout the early Middle Ages because the military technology that was available to those who defended the walls and to those on the offensive ostensibly remained constant until the period following the first Crusade in not later.<sup>57</sup>

Large military forces were required to invest large and prosperous fortress cities such as Bourges. Therefore, it was necessary for large forces to be mobilized if sieges were to be raised or otherwise thwarted by the defenders who sought to engage the invaders in the field. For example, in the summer of 583 an army of between 15,000-20,000 effectives, led by Duke Desiderius and Duke Bladast, advanced on Bourges from the south with the aim of laying the city under siege. This invasion force was confronted at Châteaumeillant, on the Berry frontier, by a force of some 15,000 troops composed of the augmented general levy of the

region and commanded by Ullo, the count of Bourges. In the ensuing battle, the Berichon forces were defeated and retreated to Bourges in order to prepare the defense of the city against the forthcoming siege. A contemporary reports that the forces in the battle at Châteaumeillant suffered combined casualties in the 7,000 range.<sup>58</sup>

Continuity between the later Roman empire and the Merovingian kingdoms can also be identified in regard to the campaign strategy and tactics used by the commanders of field armies. For example, the Gallo-Roman general, Mummolus (d. 586), is consistently depicted by Gregory of Tours in his *History* as employing trickery and surprise, avoiding potentially risky encounters, choosing the battlefield when he decided to fight, preparing fortifications carefully, looking after his logistic needs, slaughtering foragers in surprise raids, forcing the enemy to surrender its plunder, and concentrating overwhelming force before going into battle.<sup>59</sup> In short, despite Gregory's defective and hostile descriptions of military operations, in general, and Mummolus' military activities, in particular,<sup>60</sup> it is evident that he very able officer. Arguably he was the best military commander produced in Merovingian Gaul and it is clear that he operated in consonance with the advice found in the military handbooks such as Vegetius's *De re Militari*.<sup>61</sup>

*To conclude:* the construction of massive fortress cities and lesser fortification during the later Roman empire thoroughly altered the military topography of Gaul and conditioned grand strategy, campaign strategy, tactics, and combat techniques for a millennium and more. Sieges came to dominate warfare and the population was militarized both to defend the fortified population centers and to provide the rank and file for local defense forces and for expeditionary armies. The so-called 'barbarians' were Romanized culturally not only as a result of living within the physical environment of the empire but through conversion to Christianity, learning Latin, having their laws redrawn under the influence of Roman law, and, in general, preserving to the best of their ability the institutions that they found in Gaul.

In order to function militarily within the empire the newcomers had to learn the full range of skills that had informed warfare in late antiquity. These extended from the construction of siege engines to the provision of logistic support for the large armies that were needed to besiege massive fortress cities. Where possible,

40. Bk. VI, ch. 41.
41. Bachrach 1970a.
42. Bachrach 1974.
43. Bachrach 1972.
44. Bachrach 1993a:58-59.
45. Hollister 1962.
46. Bachrach 1972; Bachrach 1993a:58-59.
47. Bachrach 1970a; cf. Müller-Mertens 1963; Weidemann 1982 vol.II:279-281.
48. Hollister 1962.
49. Bachrach 1995b.
50. Ibid. Concerning the role of these *Gefolgsheizen* in what has come to be characterized as "feudalism" see Reynolds whose now provides the basis for further discussion of this subject.
51. Heinzelmann 1976, 1988.
52. Bachrach 1993b.
53. Hincmar 1889:35; Nelson 1986:124.
54. Bachrach and Aris 1990.
55. Claude 1960; Brühl 1975, 1990.
56. Bachrach and Aris 1990.
57. Bradbury 1992; Rogers 1992; Bachrach 1994c.
58. Bachrach 1994c:79-80, 161-167.
59. Bk. IV, chs. 42, 44, 45; bk. VI, 26; bk. VII, chs. 10, 34-37.
60. Goffart 1988:161, 180, 217, 219.
61. Bachrach 1995a.

existing imperial military personal were absorbed into the armed forces of the Merovingian kingdom and these men were encouraged to maintain their training. The tradition of learning about warfare from experienced commanders, from books, as well as from on the job experience continued in the Roman manner

and was strengthened at the *scolae* which flourished in the Merovingian royal courts.<sup>62</sup> I aver more strongly today than I did almost a quarter century ago when I wrote: "The Merovingian military recalls *Romania* rather than *Germania*."<sup>63</sup>

62. *Ibid.*  
63. Bachrach 1972.

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