THE BYZANTINE REVIEW

ByzRev 06.2024.024
doi: 10.17879/byzrev-2024-5549

ANTHONY KALDELLIS – MARION KRUSE, The Field Armies of the East Roman Empire, 361–630. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press 2023. xviii+205 pp. – ISBN 978-1-009-29694-6

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It is a rare experience to open a book with whose subject matter one is sufficiently conversant as to be asked to review it and to receive, within the first paragraph of the first page, a profoundly unexpected shock. This is the somewhat destabilising treat that waits in store for the reader of ANTHONY KALDELLIS and MARION KRUSE's (hereafter KK) new work on the East Roman army, which, on a page still numbered in Roman numerals, lays out the authors' stall in pleasingly direct fashion: the military system of five field armies described by the *Notitia Dignitatum* (two in the Balkans, two 'in the presence', and one in the East) existed for a mere handful of decades in the middle of the fifth century; it was constructed far later than generally argued and dismantled much earlier.

Those familiar with the work of KALDELLIS will perhaps not be surprised to learn that he has produced, together with KRUSE, a book that is vocal in its rejection of scholarly orthodoxy. Even for KALDELLIS, however, this must surely constitute a high watermark in his revisionist bent, because if the arguments of this book find general acceptance, much of the technical writing on the late Roman military – including such giants as DIETRICH HOFFMANN's *Das spätrömische Bewegungsheer und die* Notitia dignitatum or the relevant sections of A. H. M. JONES' *The Later Roman Empire* – will have been rendered obsolete at a stroke. Profound revision will likewise have to be made of modern theses concerning the composition, nature, and survival of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, and here again much that has been written will need to be thrown out. It is going to be a debate that I will watch with enormous interest in the years to come.

Let us begin with a brief summary of the arguments and conclusions of the book and their import, before moving to a more detailed consideration of the individual sections. The book is divided into four main chapters which relate KK's new history of the army chronologically, and which take their shape from four broad phases that they see as detectable between the mid-fourth and the mid-seventh century. These are: from the death of Julian to

that of Theodosius I; from the death of Theodosius till the creation of the *Notitia* system c. 450; the operation of the 'classical' system of the *Notitia* during a brief period lasting from roughly 450 until roughly 506; and the dismembering of this system under Justin and (especially) Justinian, with a concomitant collapse of the East Roman military under the significantly more challenging military conditions of the late fifth and early sixth centuries.

KK's use of these four chronological phases as an organising principle for their work should not be taken to indicate they view the evolution of the East Roman military as occurring within sharply delineated bounds. Their model, rather, is one of gradual and largely ad hoc change over time, reactive rather than active, and not guided by any grand strategic aims but rather responding to individual crises and the shifting demands of both internal and external politics. Fundamental to their argument is both a redating and a repurposing of the *Notitia Dignitatum*. Near-universal consensus now places the composition of the *Notitia* in the East in the 390s, the product of putative reforms to the military taken after the battle of Adrianople in 378 which produced an army that looks markedly different from the army we encounter in the pages of Ammianus. In KK's own words, however:

> when taken on their own terms and not read through the filter of the *Notitia*, neither military history nor the command structure of the eastern empire in the years between 395 and the 440s corresponds to the norms laid out in the *Notitia*. That is, there is no evidence in *any of our sources* apart from the *Notitia* itself that the *Notitia* system was put into place before the end of the reign of Theodosius II. (pp. x–xi; KK's emphasis)

Here then lies the repurposing of the text, and its redating. Rather than using the *Notitia* as a template to which the history of the later Roman army must be made to conform, KK start from the historical narrative. Through prosopography, through the careful charting of what military forces can be seen operating where and under whom, and through detailed analysis of the terminology used to refer to individual generals and their offices, both in historical texts and in the Theodosian Code, KK argue that the system of regional military commands under regional *magistri militum* cannot be detected before the 440s. That this is so has been obscured, they think, by the fact that much modern scholarship on the late fourth and early fifth century, including, importantly, the vital references of the *Prosopography of the Late Roman Empire / PLRE* and *Paulys Realencyclopädie der clas-*

sischen Altertumswissenschaft / RE, write back onto individuals the titles to be found in the *Notitia* when the sources do not refer to them as such.

This revised approach to one of the fundamental texts of late Roman history allows for a new narrative on the East Roman military. The military establishment of the Theodosians, KK argue, was considerably more conservative than has traditionally been realised. Far from overseeing a vast overhauling of the Eastern Empire's field army structure, Theodosius I relied for his major military campaigns on barbarian federate soldiers, and in general maintained a remarkably small military apparatus of perhaps two operational field armies of approximately 20,000 men each. These limited resources far more accurately explain the patterns of military activity discernible in the late fourth and early fifth centuries than does attempting to provide the Eastern Empire a military establishment like that laid out in the *Notitia*; defensive entrenchment was the watchword, with military forces remaining small both out of necessity and in order to prevent the Eastern court from succumbing to the dictatorship of the generalissimos that took place in the West.

Only with the rise of a Hunnic empire on Constantinople's doorstep in the 440s did this policy change. Here KK find the genesis of the five-army system of the *Notitia* with its vast expansion of the mobile resources available to the East in Europe. It is the praesental armies, in particular, which KK argue their model helps to explain – far from being two vast garrisons deployed around Constantinople, they were much more a mobile and responsive force ('an old-school comitatus', p. 65), deployed and partitioned in response to military realities – perhaps the most important of which was the need to deal with the truculent Gothic commanders Theoderic Strabo and Theoderic the Amal in the 470s and 480s. The build-up of this five-army system, perhaps 100,000 mobile soldiers, was made possible by the now well documented economic and demographic boom that took place in the East during this period, and its immediate strategic goals created a military deployment heavily biased towards the Empire's European frontier.

The quiescence of Persia was a *sine qua non* for this system, and it is accordingly from the time of Kavad's war (502–506) that we see the system described in the *Notitia* begin to be pulled apart to reorient the Empire towards rising threats. As new armies were created in the East and to fight Justinian's wars of expansion, the reserve forces that had underpinned the *Notitia* system, the praesental armies, were increasingly and permanently dismantled, their soldiers being portioned out to fight in Persia, Armenia,

Africa, Italy, the Balkans. By the end of Justinian's reign, this praesental reserve was utterly spent, and the East Roman military apparatus had stretched its resources to – even beyond – their breaking point. The final working out of this legacy produced the fiscal reforms of Maurice (Maurikos, as KK more authentically have him) and the consequent rise of Phocas.

The model of the Roman state presented here is worth considering: KK see it as reactive, not governed by long-term goals or policy agendas, but rather one that would respond to immediate crises in ways designed to address those crises and little else. This is a model that will be increasingly familiar to researchers and students alike, a model for which FERGUS MILLAR's 1977 *The Emperor in the Roman World* is often cited as the posterchild. In this, despite its rejection of many modern orthodoxies, I believe KK's book speaks well to present understandings of the nature and limitations of Roman government. This work very naturally also inserts itself – though never explicitly – into the 'grand strategy' debate initiated in the 1970s by EDWARD LUTTWAK, which has rumbled along merrily in the background of Roman military history ever since. KK would, I think, be firmly if not aggressively on the anti-Luttwakian team, presenting as they do a Roman world in which decisions of military policy were made on short timescales, were subject to the personal whims of the emperor, tended towards minimalism in the creation of military resources, and invariably created systems of deployment which possessed little 'give' or ability to anticipate rather than respond to problems.

The individual chapters tell this story in carefully detailed chronological fashion. Chapter 1, 'The High Command from Julian to Theodosius I (361–395)' opens the work proper, and begins with a recapitulation of the military reforms that took place, primarily, under Diocletian and Constantine, most notably the creation of mobile, central armies, and the emergence of the *magister peditum* and *magister equitum*, senior generals who, in the fourth century, did not possess regionally delineated commands. From the death of Julian, however, KK's account begins to diverge from the orthodoxy, and perhaps more radically after Adrianople. Despite the proliferation of generals under Theodosius, to which Zosimus (4.27) somewhat cryptically refers, KK argue that there exists no clear evidence for a concomitant multiplication of armies, and indeed – reasonably – point out that demographic reality makes it highly unlikely that Theodosius was able to create a mobile army structure of c. 100,000 soldiers. The authors see his innovations as limited to three main points: firstly, the emerging tendency

to call the *magistri* either *magister utriusque militae* or simple *magister militum*, rather than use the *equitum/peditum* distinction of earlier decades; secondly, the creation of a formalised regional field army in the East under a *magister militum per Orientem*, the only such command to exist before the 440s; and, thirdly and finally, a pronounced tendency to rely on barbarian federates to provide the muscle for virtually all major military ventures.

Chapter 2, 'The Late Emergence of the Eastern *Notitia* System (395–450)', explicitly rejects the notion that the system described in the *Notitia* is owed to Theodosius I; if it were, they ask, then why were East and West organised so very differently, given that we are expected to see both systems as the blueprint of a single mind? Military units named for Theodosius and Arcadius do not exist in the Western *Notitia* (they do in the East), again a bizarre fact if the system was created by Theodosius. The military events of the 390s and of the first half of the fifth century (the revolts of Tribigild and Gainas, the limited and often unsuccessful interventions of the Eastern military in the West, and the apparent inability to counter Attila) militate strongly against any suggestion that Constantinople had at its disposal significant reserves of mobile manpower. Furthermore, KK argue that the military titles of the *Notitia* are, virtually without exception, absent from the historical record, which is doubly striking given the preponderance of rescripts sent to generals in this period, as preserved in the Theodosian Code. By contrast, though the narrative sources for the 440s are notoriously patchy, it is in precisely this decade that *magistri militum per Thracias*, *per Illyricum*, and *praesentalis* first appear.

The arguments presented here have the great advantage that they are eminently falsifiable. KK have made a series of clearly defined evidential claims that can be proven true or false. They argue that the structure of the *Notitia* is not detectable in the East prior to the 440s. Those who may wish to dispute these claims need only to be able to find counterexamples in sufficient numbers (and in consideration of KK's own arguments about the forerunners of the *Notitia* and about apparently exceptional cases like Constans, *magister militum per Thracias* in 412: *CTh* 7.17.1 and pp. 32–33) in order to disprove this thesis. Can they?

Chapter 3, 'The 'Classic' Phase of the Eastern Field Armies (450–506)' then charts the half century in which the system outlined in the *Notitia* actually operated. The field commands – and attendant military forces – were created to deal first with the military threat from Attila and then used to manage the Gothic leaders Theoderic Strabo and Theoderic the Amal.

This system was created ad hoc to deal with crisis in the Balkans. Thus, two large armies were deployed in the peninsula, *per Thracias* and *per Illyricum*, reinforced by the praesental armies, which acted as a mobile reserve, their units and commanders going where military necessity commanded. In KK's own words, '[t]he period 450–506 was thus the high point of the praesental armies, the only one during which we can say that they existed and occasionally operated at their notional strength of 20,000 apiece' (p. 59). The huge Eastern fiscal surpluses in this period had allowed for this massive multiplication of the East's mobile military reserves, which had been created to meet a specific – and relatively transient – series of crises in the Empire's European rump. No grand strategy here.

Chapter 4, 'The Dispersal and Decline of the Eastern Field Armies (506–630)' begins with a reminder of how very odd the *Notitia*'s system actually looks, with its huge preferencing of the western deployment:

> This imbalance is yet another sign that the *Notitia* captures a distinct moment in the evolution of the armies of east Rome, rather than a general blueprint for a long-term military system. The *Notitia* system was sustainable only in the context of a quiescent Persia. It was designed in response to Attila, not the shahs. (p. 67)

As any student of the period knows well, the sixth century saw a significant shift in Romano-Persian relations. A new command was created for the Eastern front in 528, the *magister militum per Armeniam et Pontum Polemoniacum et gentes*, its manpower made up 'overwhelmingly' (p. 72) from the praesental armies. In what follows, we see Justinian constantly moving about the Empire a seemingly shrinking pool of soldiers. The soldiers for North Africa (KK infer, on reasonable grounds) were drawn from the East. Justinian's difficulty in providing Belisarius with reinforcements for the campaigns in Italy shows that 'the process of cannibalization [of the praesentals] was far advanced' (p. 77). By 551, a total end seems to have come to praesental units stationed around the capital, and praesental units are absent from campaigns in which we should otherwise have expected them. Though the last attested *magister militum praesentalis* held office in 585, the role had by that point become a largely ceremonial one. KK offer an 'operational tally for the years around 590' of 70,000–75,000 soldiers across all of the Eastern Empire's field armies, down from a high of perhaps 100,000 around 500 (pp. 85–86). This, then, was the legacy that Justinian left his successors – a vastly expanded catalogue of foreign wars

being fought by an army that plague and casualties had depleted by almost a third. Little wonder that subsequent events transpired as they did.

The conclusion of the book offers more than just a summary of its main arguments. Particularly noteworthy is KK's look back to the time of Augustus and forward to the middle Byzantine period. In this, they advance (briefly) a *longue durée* model of Roman military deployment from Augustus to the crusades, in which 'Roman strategic dispositions cycled through centuries-long patterns that oscillated between a focus on frontier defence and an investment in mobile striking power' (p. 104). The argument, above all, is that any notion of a static East Roman military system as described by the *Notitia* should be jettisoned.

Four very sizeable appendices deal with (respectively) 'The Roman High Command at Adrianople (378)', '*Magistri militum* under Theodosius I (379–395)', 'A Revised *Fasti* of the Eastern Praesental Generals', and 'The Date of the *Notitia dignitatum: Oriens*'. Of the first three, I have relatively little to say except that those interested in the prosopography of the late Roman military should study them carefully and use them in tandem with the *PLRE*. Both their specific conclusions and their general methodology will be useful tools. Of the last, however, a few words. Here, KK acknowledge some of the deeper implications of their thesis on the field. In it, they offer responses to some of the potential objections that they expect that their work will elicit (*caveat scriptor*, be sure to familiarise yourself with these before composing your polemics!). They also reiterate both their arguments for a late dating of the text but – more importantly to my mind – their approach to dealing with the *Notitia*:

> Absent a major breakthrough in research on the *Notitia*, there is no way to know who wrote it, under what circumstances, or for what purpose. Our ignorance of these fundamental points imposes harsh limits on how we can use the document as a source for studying the later empire. (p. 155)

This seems to me one of the important contributions of this book. Though it would be unfair to say that a note of caution was never sounded before, KK's work stands as a powerful reminder of the *Notitia*'s limits and a warning to researchers who find themselves being drawn into rocky waters by its siren song. What I might dub KK's 'narrative-first' approach, namely, that the *Notitia* should be ignored – or at the very least distrusted – if other historical sources cannot confirm its claims is a position I am deeply sympathetic to. Sadly, however, one looks in vain for further answers about the

nature, exact date, and wider meaning of the document, and in particular what ramifications KK's arguments about the Eastern section have for its eternally perplexing Western section; they firmly and explicitly leave such questions to others.

This summary of mine has been remarkably difficult to put together, which is a testament to the extraordinary depth and detail of the work. At a mere 104 pages of main text (supported by 75 pages of appendices), the volume packs an enormous scholarly punch, and there are innumerable particularities, qualifications, and specific arguments that I have omitted here so that my own account does not turn into something like Lewis Carroll's 1:1 map.[1] Clearly and concisely written, KK's book delivers abundant food for thought on a surprisingly small plate.

If I have criticisms, it is only that I find KK's characterisation of the *PLRE* and the *RE* perhaps a little unfair; their sins are less egregious, I think, than KK claim, and this is worth mentioning. A quick thumbing through Volume II of the *PLRE* indicates that it is hardly bull-headed in attempting to ascribe military titles drawn from *Notitia* to individuals not explicitly attested as their bearers, and when it does this (so my survey suggests), it generally does it tentatively. In wider scholarship too, I think awareness of KK's basic argument that one should take care not to construct too many scholarly castles on the *Notitia*'s shaky foundation is perhaps more generally known than they allow for. That being said, a quick survey of volumes that I have at hand does indicate that KK are right in claiming that at least some authors have been too quick to take the *Notitia* as gospel and attempt to use it as a corrective on other sources.

I have done my best in this review to accurately (if concisely) report KK's arguments without passing judgement on them myself. This I have done in part because I would not profess sufficient expertise on the *Notitia* to mount a spirited defence of the positions that they assail, in part because I wish to remain a civilian in the inevitable war of words that is likely to follow, and in part because I confess myself deeply inclined to be receptive to a work like this. The history of the early fifth century, on both sides of the Mediterranean, makes it virtually impossible to believe that the military dispositions described in the *Notitia* existed in reality at that time. Honorius, we are told, was considering flight to the East in the face of Alaric and Attalus, when suddenly his prayers were answered by the appearance of six regiments of reinforcements from his brother in the East – either 4,000

1. L. Carroll, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded. London: Macmillan 1893, p. 169.

(Soz. 9.8) or 6,000 men (Zos. 6.8.2). Where, then, were the nearly 30,000 infantry and cavalry that *Notitia* tells us existed in a field army *intra Italiam*? Examples like this could easily be multiplied (and KK have many).

A challenge has been thrown down here, and one that will have to be answered. If you have any interest whatsoever in *Notitia Dignitatum*, in the late Roman army, in the military-fiscal organization of the late Roman state, or in the political history of the East Roman Empire, you must read this book.

Keywords
late Roman army; military history