

2024

Review of "Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity: A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises" by Łukasz Różycki

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Recommended Citation

McMahon, Lucas "Review of "Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity: A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises" by Łukasz Różycki." Canadian Military History 33, 2 (2024)

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Łukasz Różycki. *Battlefield Emotions in Late Antiquity: A Study of Fear and Motivation in Roman Military Treatises*. Leiden: Brill, 2021. Pp. 333.

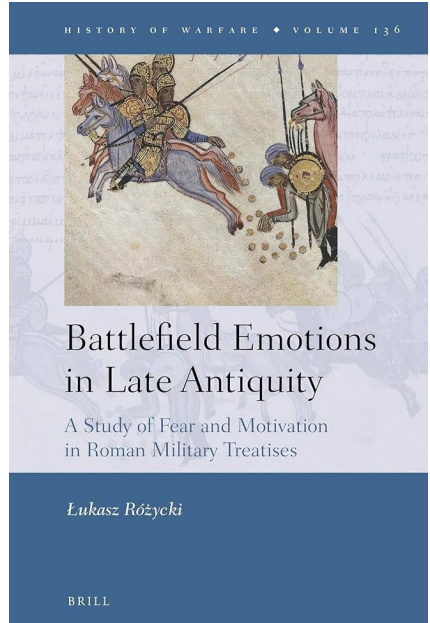
The history of emotions in the distant past is a difficult subject, but in this pioneering book Łukasz Różycki tackles it competently and intelligently. Fear is the entry point, defined as universal in military situations as well as an emotion that requires careful management lest it get out of hand and disaster ensue. What Różycki is asking is how did Roman leaders attempt to manage fear in their own troops, and how did they try to use it against the enemy? For whatever the military manuals explicitly state about the qualities of a general, Różycki here convincingly demonstrates that underlying these virtues is a need for a leader to be an astute judge of military psychology. They need to be able to manipulate their soldiers in such a manner that they will master their fear of combat and do what is needed of them to win. The novel picture painted here is that of a commander, to whom the Roman manuals are addressed, whose job extends beyond the tactics and operational art to that of exercising behavioural control through psychological means over his soldiers. While this brings a fresh human perspective to the Roman war machine, it also brings to the surface its cynicism and cruelty. Różycki explicitly acknowledges that the system which transformed normal people into warriors was an oppressive one, and defines the military treatises as “state-centric writing.”

Różycki’s materials are the military manuals or treatises of late antiquity, primarily the fifth-century Latin text of Vegetius, and the late sixth-century treatise attributed to the emperor Maurice. However, Różycki’s late antiquity is generously interpreted here, extending all the way to the later eleventh century, including the texts of Syrianos Magister (ninth century) and Leo VI’s *Taktika* (tenth century). This is a perfectly reasonable approach, as the manuals written in Greek are part of a long tradition of military writing and in Byzantium are often bundled together in manuscript form. Notable, however, is Różycki’s use of Vegetius alongside the treatises in Greek, where the Latin text is fully integrated into the broader thought-world of late antique military writing. Różycki supplements the military manuals with historical texts, particularly those of Procopius and Theophylact Simocatta, as well as psychological studies of fear and motivation in military history more broadly.

The psychology is lightly and carefully applied, and Różycki argues that fear in the face of violent death is universally human and that the Romans were as subject to it as anyone else. Not everyone will agree with this and some further consideration of social and cultural factors might have been in order, but Różycki still needs to be commended for taking a clear stance. Through a judicious selection of examples, it ultimately does not matter if the “universal soldier” idea holds water because it works well enough here and presents a fresh reading and intriguing reading of the late Roman and Byzantine military texts. What Różycki is ultimately trying to do is find a fresh approach to applying *The Face of Battle*

to the late Roman world, where the sources rarely let us get very close to the individual soldier. He succeeds admirably in this, and through the twin pillars of fear and motivation shows how soldiers’ emotions were controlled by their commanders to win on the battlefield.

The bulk of this discussion takes place across four chapters (chapters 2-5). The first, “Fighting Fear,” goes through how Roman commanders attempted to maintain order and discipline in their armies both in battle and when it was imminent. Różycki identifies a number of common approaches over the long period covered by the military treatises: get the troops to swear oaths, keep them at the base of hills so they will not observe the enemy, cover flanks with terrain, water, or blocking troops, and instil confidence by winning skirmishes and ambushes. The manuals suggest manipulating the troops by using “us-them” group dynamics when discussing the enemy, but they also contain more specific ethnographic information for the commander to make use of. This chapter ends with a particularly intriguing section on the psychological value of military equipment. Różycki argues that while it was designed to make the wearer feel safe and look threatening, this was only part of it. In addition, the use of animal skins deliberately played into ideas of magical thinking, that if someone was wearing a particular animal’s hide they had defeated the animal and imbued its power. With even less



information on how Rome's opponents experienced battle this is difficult to say, but the idea remains intriguing nonetheless.

The following chapter turns from managing the fear felt by Roman soldiers into using it as a weapon. Much of this again comes from the military treatises, and has close parallels with the previous chapter: win skirmishes to make the enemy afraid, march in silence to calm one's own troops and animals while causing the enemy fear at the level of discipline on display, and how to use deserters and spies to impact morale. After that, Różycki turns to the commander, arguing that their job was to balance reward and punishment to keep the troops in line. A notably strong section examines the social control that the threat of collective punishments had on the army, and Różycki argues that monitoring one's fellow soldiers while being monitored in turn was an effective disciplinary system. The chapter concludes with a section on speeches, and Różycki notes that those in the manuals are more about buoying up courage, remembering past victories, and the potential rewards from winning than those in the historical texts, which tend to have a narrative purpose and use more abstract ideas about military duties or the glory of the homeland.

Readers expecting to see this in action might be surprised that the next and final chapter discusses the aftermath of battle. Again Różycki demonstrates the value of his approach in mixing psychology with the military treatises. He emphasises that the treatises' note that winning the battle somewhat counter-intuitively leaves the army in an exhausted, vulnerable state, as excess risk-taking was followed by fatigue and then apathy. He also notes some disagreement in the treatises here, as Vegetius thinks a victorious enemy can be put to flight by attacking following a defeat, whereas Maurice is more cautious. Still, as Różycki notes, this only demonstrates that both authors were departing from a common awareness of how to use military psychology to best effect on the battlefield.

Overall, this is an important study that convincingly brings military psychology to the late Roman treatises and results in a fresh and convincing reading of them. This is a significant contribution to the study of the 'Face of Battle' through a unique methodology, demonstrates how much can still be learned about the late Roman army, and will be of interest to anyone studying the psychology and emotions of soldiers in other times and places.