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Roman Military Signalling (review)

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in 353 to crush the Phokian flank, the first example of the new Macedonian tactics. Although Philip deployed no cavalry at his masterpiece of Chaeroneia in 338, Alexander transformed the arm into a formidable part of the army that he led to India. Hannibal in the west learned Alexander's eastern lessons, which he used in a string of victories against Rome. Only Scipio Africanus, himself a member of this equestrian tradition, overcame the Carthaginians at Zama in 202.

In sum, Gaebel has traced the evolution of a scouting and secondary branch of service into an effective arm of attack. The coverage is complete and for the most part sound.

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***Roman Military Signalling.*** By D. J. Woolliscroft. Charleston, S.C.: Tempus Publishing, 2001. ISBN 0-7524-1938-2. Maps. Photographs. Appendixes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. 191. \$29.99.

David Woolliscroft is a specialist on Hadrian's Wall and an experienced aerial photographer. He is also Director of the Roman Gask Project, which studies the Roman frontier around the Gask Ridge in Perthshire, Scotland. These qualifications make him just the author to enlighten readers on the theories of Roman frontier defense in the British Isles and comparative material from other provinces. This particular book will be of interest to intelligence scholars since his main focus is on signalling and the transmission of intelligence on the borders of the empire.

His thesis is a simple one: Roman frontiers could have been equipped with a comprehensive signalling system. He explains in layman's terms how he believed it worked. But he does not stop there. He also tries to make the case that signalling was of such high priority on the frontiers that other aspects of frontier design could be compromised to enhance it. In other words, the requirements of intelligence gathering on the frontiers influenced the overall design of such defences as Hadrian's Wall, and its surrounding supportive structures.

There have been previous attempts to identify signalling systems on Rome's borders, but they have usually been hampered by a lack of solid archaeological evidence. If the installations from which the Romans signalled on a particular frontier have not been excavated, then it is very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about how their signalling system worked. Even in provinces such as Britain where more excavation and systematic study has been done and the installations are still visible, we are still hampered by the fact that signalling leaves little evidence. Unless a signalling tower was built in stone, or a wooden structure was surrounded by a ditch, little trace of it may remain.

Woolliscroft has taken three of the best-studied stretches of the Roman

frontier, namely Hadrian's Wall, the Wetterau *Limes* in Germany, and the Upper German/Raetian border, and created models which explain how each system might have worked. He concludes there is enough similarity on all three frontier areas to suggest how the Romans designed their signalling systems and adapted to terrain, visibility, and tactical considerations. In other words there may be a universal theory of frontier design.

One of the original contributions this book makes to the study of signalling among the Romans is the intervisibility studies. Woolliscroft has mapped out every single Roman installation in the sectors he has studied, i.e., every fort, fortlet, watchtower, signal tower, etc., and in the places where they had not yet been located but might be reasonably expected to exist, he conducted excavations. This would have been service enough, but then using an elevated camera tower of his own design, he checked the intervisibility between every site he discusses. Therefore, he is not guessing whether the Romans could have signalled from these towers, he knows for a fact that it was at least possible. He then illustrates the proposed signalling systems in a series of easy-to-understand illustrations which make his thesis quite plausible. Woolliscroft is wise enough to introduce the obvious caveat himself, that is, that just because the Romans *could* do something does not necessarily prove that they *did* do it. No matter how much testing is done from these locations, we can only suggest what might have been possible in Roman times, not what actually happened. Woolliscroft knows his theory is speculative at best, but he has used the best field techniques to set up a hypothesis which may be tested by others and can be tested again and again as more archaeological evidence comes to light.

As technical as this study is, the book is user-friendly for novice readers. The author begins with a discussion of ancient signalling techniques in general and the use of codes. He has done actual field testing on ancient signalling codes and demonstrated his results for the BBC. The literary sources for signalling in the ancient world are meager, and the author conveniently provides translations of them all in Appendix I. He is generous in his inclusion of works by authors such as Donaldson and Southern who are much more skeptical than he is. Some scholars believe we are too ready to credit the Romans' signalling system with greater technical proficiency than the ancient sources allow, and too willing to propose complex networks without adequate consideration of the technical problems involved. This work goes far beyond the only other comprehensive study, which was self-published by W. Leiner in 1982, *Der Signaltechnik Der Antike*, and which discussed only the literary sources. The bibliography provides readers with all the major works on the subject with one exception. Since the secondary literature on signalling is so small, a curious lacuna is the absence of the work of Volker Aschoff: e.g., *Geschichte der Nachrichtentechnik* (1984); *Aus der Geschichte der Telegraphen-Codes* (1981), and "Optische Nachrichtenübertragung im klassischen Altertum," *Nachrichtentechnische Zeitschrift* 30 (1977): 26–31, all of which contain discussion of the optical possibilities of Roman signalling. This minor oversight and the occasional

typographical error are the only faults in an otherwise attractive, affordable book which will inform an audience of not only specialists in Roman history and intelligence studies but also the casual reader of military history.

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*Medieval Naval Warfare, 1000–1500.* By Susan Rose. New York: Routledge, 2002. ISBN 0-415-23976-1. Maps. Illustrations. Glossary. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xvi, 155. \$80.00.

This slim volume is packed with information and insight. Author Susan Rose is known to students of medieval maritime history for her work on the English navy of the fifteenth century. She has also edited the accounts of the keeper of the king's ships for 1422–27. Her work is firmly rooted in the primary sources held by the Public Record Office and other repositories. In this volume she expands her range to include “the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the so-called Western approaches and the North Sea” (p. xv).

The definition of naval warfare between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries is explained with a stress on the common structural elements of ships used in war and trade. Some readers will want to see this expressed through the archaeology of medieval ships and perhaps a reference to the twelve-volume Conway's *History of the Ship*, especially the volume edited by Richard Unger, *Cogs, Caravels, and Galleons* (1994). But the author makes clear that the construction and design of ships is not the main consideration. The purpose is to demonstrate “the way in which ships and mariners were drawn into the service of rulers, to serve their ends in war” (p. xvi). The focus is on strategy and tactics, and the employment of seapower. Rose carefully defines the concept of control of the sea, explaining that medieval fleets could not stay on station to form blockades or maintain regular patrols.

The volume is organized in an effective manner. The opening chapter on “Dockyards and Administration” focuses on the logistics of medieval fleets. The sweep is across a range of examples drawn from the Mediterranean, principally Italy, to the Channel and Atlantic waters—mainly France and England. Chapter Two, “Invaders and Settlers,” examines the Channel and North Sea from 1000 to 1250. The discussion of warfare begins with the Vikings and includes conflicts fought in longships and those by Western Europeans in sailing ships. Tactics include the use of galleys, the use of missiles of all sorts—stones, arrows, lances, and grappling and boarding. A fine example is the account of the sea battle resulting in the capture and beheading by the English of the “pirate” Eustace the Monk.

The third chapter examines naval warfare in the Mediterranean during the Crusades. Particular use is made of the War of the Sicilian Vespers initiated in 1282. Admiral Roger of Lauria commanded the Catalan-Aragonese fleet in several sea battles, employing successful tactics.