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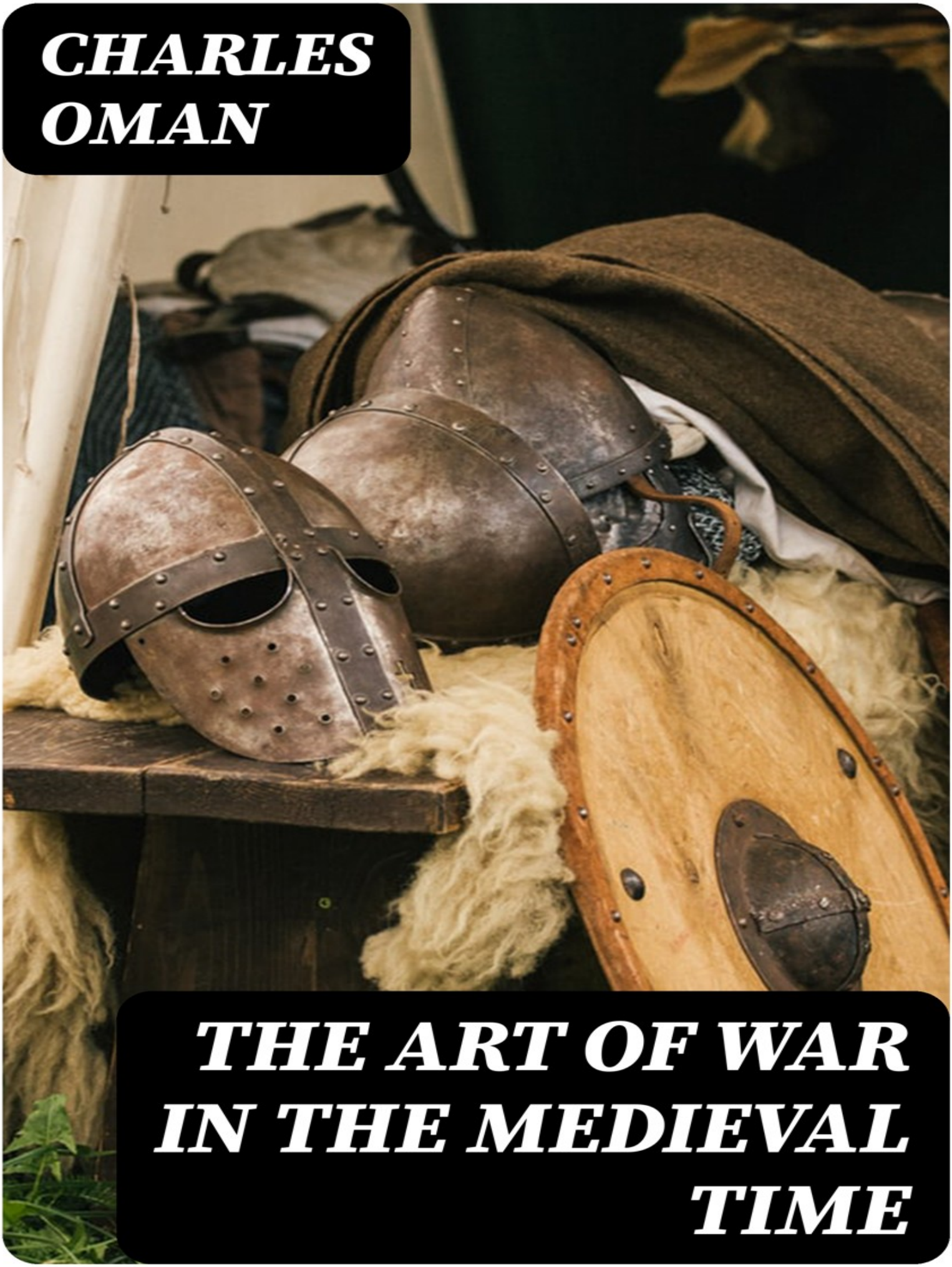

THE ART OF WAR IN THE MEDIEVAL TIME

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Introduction

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The Art of War has been very simply defined as ‘the art which enables any commander to worst the forces opposed to him.’ It is therefore conversant with an enormous variety of subjects: Strategy and Tactics are but two of the more important of its branches. Besides dealing with discipline, organization, and armament, it is bound to investigate every means which can be adapted to increase the physical or moral efficiency of an army. The author who opened his work with a dissertation on ‘the age which is preferable in a generalissimo,’ or ‘the average height which the infantry soldier should attain[1],’ was dealing with the Art of War, no less than he who confined himself to purely tactical speculations.

The complicated nature of the subject being taken into consideration, it is evident that a complete sketch, of the social and political history of any period would be necessary to account fully for the state of the ‘Art of War’ at the time. That art has existed, in a rudimentary form, ever since the day on which two bodies of men first met in anger to settle a dispute by the arbitrament of force. At some epochs, however, military and social history have been far more closely bound up than at others. In the present century wars are but episodes in a people’s existence: there have, however, been times when the whole national organization was founded on the supposition of a normal state of strife. In such cases the history of the race and of its ‘art of war’

are one and the same. To detail the constitution of Sparta, or of Ancient Germany, is to give little more than a list of military institutions. Conversely, to speak of the characteristics of their military science involves the mention of many of their political institutions.

At no time was this interpenetration more complete than in the age which forms the central part of our period. Feudalism, in its origin and development, had a military as well as a social side, and its decline is by no means unaffected by military considerations. There is a point of view from which its history could be described as ‘the rise, supremacy, and decline of heavy cavalry as the chief power in war.’ To a certain extent the tracing out of this thesis will form the subject of our researches. It is here that we find the thread which links the history of the military art in the middle ages into a connected whole. Between Adrianople, the first, and Marignano, the last, of the triumphs of the mediæval horseman, lie the chapters in the scientific history of war which we are about to investigate.

The Transition from Roman to Mediæval Forms in War - A.D. 378–582.

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[From the battle of Adrianople to the Accession of Maurice.]

Between the middle of the fourth and the end of the sixth century lies a period of transition in military history, an epoch of transformations as strange and as complete as those contemporary changes which turned into a new channel the course of political history and civilisation in Europe. In war, as in all else, the institutions of the ancient world are seen to pass away, and a new order of things develops itself.

Numerous and striking as are the symptoms of that period of transition, none is more characteristic than the gradual disuse of the honoured name of ‘Legion,’ the title intimately bound up with all the ages of Roman greatness. Surviving in a very limited acceptance in the time of Justinian[2], it had fifty years later become obsolete. It represented a form of military efficiency which had now completely vanished. That wonderful combination of strength and flexibility, so solid and yet so agile and easy to handle, had ceased to correspond to the needs of the time. The day of the sword and pilum had given place to that of the lance and bow. The typical Roman soldier was no longer

the iron legionary, who, with shield fitted close to his left shoulder and sword-hilt sunk low, cut his way through the thickest hedge of pikes, and stood firm before the wildest onset of Celt or German[3]. The organization of Augustus and Trajan was swept away by Constantine, and the legions which for three hundred years had preserved their identity, their proud titles of honour, and their *ésprit de corps*, knew themselves no longer[4].

Constantine, when he cut down the numbers of the military unit to a quarter of its former strength, and created many scores of new corps[5], was acting from motives of political and not military expediency[6]. The armament and general character of the troops survived their organization, and the infantry, the ‘robur peditum,’ still remained the most important and numerous part of the army. At the same time, however, a tendency to strengthen the cavalry made itself felt, and the proportion of that arm to the whole number of the military establishment continued steadily to increase throughout the fourth century. Constantine himself, by depriving the legion of its complementary ‘turmae,’ and uniting the horsemen into larger independent bodies, bore witness to their growing importance. It would seem that the Empire--having finally abandoned the offensive in war, and having resolved to confine itself to the protection of its own provinces--found that there was an increasing need for troops who could transfer themselves with rapidity from one menaced point on the frontier to another. The Germans could easily distance the legion, burdened by the care of its military machines and impedimenta. Hence cavalry in larger numbers was required to intercept their raids.

But it would appear that another reason for the increase of the horsemen was even more powerful. The ascendancy of the Roman infantry over its enemies was no longer so marked as in earlier ages, and it therefore required to be more strongly supported by cavalry than had been previously necessary. The Franks, Burgundians, and Allemanni of the days of Constantine were no longer the half-armed savages of the first century, who, 'without helm or mail, with weak shields of wicker-work, and armed only with the javelin[7],' tried to face the embattled front of the cohort. They had now the iron-bound buckler, the pike, and the short stabbing sword ('scramasax'), as well as the long cutting sword ('spatha'), and the deadly 'francisca' or battle-axe, which, whether thrown or wielded, would penetrate Roman armour and split the Roman shield. As weapons for hand to hand combat these so far surpassed the old 'framea,' that the imperial infantry found it no light matter to defeat a German tribe. At the same time, the *morale* of the Roman army was no longer what it had once been: the corps were no longer homogeneous, and the insufficient supply of recruits was eked out by enlisting slaves and barbarians in the legions themselves, and not only among the auxiliary cohorts[8]. Though seldom wanting in courage, the troops of the fourth century had lost the self-reliance and cohesion of the old Roman infantry, and required far more careful handling on the part of the general. Few facts show this more forcibly than the proposal of the tactician Urbicius to furnish the legionaries with a large supply of portable beams and stakes, to be carried by pack-mules attached to each cohort. These were to be planted on the

flanks and in the front of the legion, when there was a probability of its being attacked by hostile cavalry: behind them the Romans were to await the enemy's onset, without any attempt to assume the offensive[9]. This proposition marks a great decay in the efficiency of the imperial foot-soldier: the troops of a previous generation would have scorned such a device, accustomed as they were to drive back with ease the assaults of the Parthian and Sarmatian 'cataphracti.'

This tendency to deterioration on the part of the Roman infantry, and the consequent neglect of that arm by the generals of the time, were brought to a head by a disaster. The battle of Adrianople was the most fearful defeat suffered by a Roman army since Cannæ; a slaughter to which it is aptly compared by the military author Ammianus Marcellinus. The Emperor Valens, all his chief officers[10], and forty thousand men were left upon the field; indeed the army of the East was almost annihilated, and was never reorganized upon the same lines as had previously served for it.

The military importance of Adrianople was unmistakable; it was a victory of cavalry over infantry. The imperial army had developed its attack on the position of the Goths, and the two forces were hotly engaged, when suddenly a great body of horsemen charged in upon the Roman flank. It was the main strength of the Gothic cavalry, which had been foraging at a distance; receiving news of the fight it had ridden straight for the battlefield. Two of Valens' squadrons, which covered the flank of his array, threw themselves in the way of the oncoming mass, and were ridden down and

trampled under foot. Then the Goths swept down on the infantry of the left wing, rolled it up, and drove it in upon the centre. So tremendous was their impact that the legions and cohorts were pushed together in helpless confusion. Every attempt to stand firm failed, and in a few minutes left, centre, and reserve were one undistinguishable mass. Imperial guards, light troops, lancers, foederati and infantry of the line were wedged together in a press that grew closer every moment. The Roman cavalry saw that the day was lost, and rode off without another effort. Then the abandoned infantry realised the horror of their position: equally unable to deploy or to fly, they had to stand to be cut down. It was a sight such as had been seen once before at Cannæ, and was to be seen once after at Rosbecque. Men could not raise their arms to strike a blow, so closely were they packed; spears snapped right and left, their bearers being unable to lift them to a vertical position: many soldiers were stifled in the press. Into this quivering mass the Goths rode, plying lance and sword against the helpless enemy. It was not till two-thirds of the Roman army had fallen that the thinning of the ranks enabled a few thousand men to break out[11], and follow their right wing and cavalry in a headlong flight.

Such was the battle of Adrianople, the first great victory gained by that heavy cavalry which had now shown its ability to supplant the heavy infantry of Rome as the ruling power of war. During their sojourn in the steppes of South Russia the Goths, first of all Teutonic races, had become a nation of horsemen. Dwelling in the Ukraine, they had felt the influence of that land, ever the nurse of cavalry, from

the day of the Scythian to that of the Tartar and Cossack. They had come to ‘consider it more honourable to fight on horse than on foot[12],’ and every chief was followed by his war-band of mounted men. Driven against their will into conflict with the empire, they found themselves face to face with the army that had so long held the world in fear. The shock came, and, probably to his own surprise, the Goth found that his stout lance and good steed would carry him through the serried ranks of the legion. He had become the arbiter of war, the lineal ancestor of all the knights of the middle ages, the inaugurator of that ascendancy of the horseman which was to endure for a thousand years.

Theodosius, on whom devolved the task of reorganizing the troops of the Eastern empire, appears to have appreciated to its fullest extent the military meaning of the fight of Adrianople. Abandoning the old Roman theory of war, he decided that the cavalry must in future compose the most important part of the imperial army. To provide himself with a sufficient force of horsemen, he was driven to a measure destined to sever all continuity between the military organization of the fourth and that of the fifth century. He did not, like Constantine, raise new corps, but began to enlist wholesale every Teutonic chief whom he could bribe to enter his service. The war-bands which followed these princes were not incorporated with the national troops; they obeyed their immediate commanders alone, and were strangers to the discipline of the Roman army. Yet to them was practically entrusted the fate of the empire; since they formed the most efficient division of the imperial forces. From the time of Theodosius the prince had

to rely for the maintenance of order in the Roman world merely on the amount of loyalty which a constant stream of titles and honours could win from the commanders of the ‘Foederati.’

Only six years after Adrianople there were already 40,000 Gothic and other German horsemen serving under their own chiefs in the army of the East. The native troops sunk at once to an inferior position in the eyes of Roman generals, and the justice of their decision was verified a few years later when Theodosius’ German mercenaries won for him the two well-contested battles which crushed the usurper Magnus Maximus and his son Victor. On both those occasions, the Roman infantry of the West, those Gallic legions who had always been considered the best footmen in the world, were finally ridden down by the Teutonic cavalry who followed the standard of the legitimate emperor[13].

A picture of the state of the imperial army in the Western provinces, drawn precisely at this period, has been preserved for us in the work of Vegetius, a writer whose treatise would be of far greater value had he refrained from the attempt to identify the organization of his own day with that of the first century, by the use of the same words for entirely different things. In drawing inferences from his statements, it has also to be remembered that he frequently gives the ideal military forms of his imagination, instead of those which really existed in his day. For example, his legion is made to consist of 6000 men, while we know that in the end of the fourth century its establishment did not exceed 1500. His work is dedicated to one of the emperors who

bore the name of Valentinian, probably to the second, as (in spite of Gibbon's arguments in favour of Valentinian III) the relations of the various arms to each other and the character of their organization point to a date prior to the commencement of the fifth century.

A single fact mentioned by Vegetius gives us the date at which the continuity of the existence of the old Roman heavy infantry may be said to terminate. As might be expected, this epoch exactly corresponds with that of the similar change in the East, which followed the battle of Adrianople. 'From the foundation of the city to the reign of the sainted Gratian,' says the tactician, 'the legionaries wore helmet and cuirass. But when the practice of holding frequent reviews and sham-fights ceased, these arms began to seem heavy, because the soldiers seldom put them on. They therefore begged from the emperor permission to discard first their cuirasses, and then even their helmets, and went to face the barbarians unprotected by defensive arms. In spite of the disasters which have since ensued, the infantry have not yet resumed the use of them.... And now, how can the Roman soldier expect victory, when helmless and unarmoured, and even without a shield (for the shield cannot be used in conjunction with the bow), he goes against the enemy[14]?'

Vegetius--often more of a rhetorician than a soldier--has evidently misstated the reason of this change in infantry equipment. At a time when cavalry were clothing themselves in more complete armour, it is not likely that the infantry were discarding it from mere sloth and feebleness. The real meaning of the change was that, in despair of

resisting horsemen any longer by the solidity of a line of heavy infantry, the Romans had turned their attention to the use of missile weapons,--a method of resisting cavalry even more efficacious than that which they abandoned, as was to be shown a thousand years later at Cressy and Agincourt. That Vegetius' account is also considerably exaggerated is shown by his enumeration of the legionary order of his own day, where the first rank was composed of men retaining shield, pilum, and cuirass (whom he pedantically calls 'Principes'). The second rank was composed of archers, but wore the cuirass and carried a lance also; only the remaining half of the legion had entirely discarded armour, and given up all weapons but the bow.

Vegetius makes it evident that cavalry, though its importance was rapidly increasing, had not yet entirely supplanted infantry to such a large extent as in the Eastern Empire. Though no army can hope for success without them, and though they must always be at hand to protect the flanks, they are not, in his estimation, the most effective force. As an antiquary he feels attached to the old Roman organization, and must indeed have been somewhat behind the military experience of his day. It may, however, be remembered that the Franks and Allemanni, the chief foes against whom the Western legions had to contend, were--unlike the Goths--nearly all footmen. It was not till the time of Alaric that Rome came thoroughly to know the Gothic horsemen, whose efficiency Constantinople had already comprehended and had contrived for the moment to subsidize. In the days of Honorius, however, the Goth became the terror of Italy, as he had previously been of the

Balkan peninsula. His lance and steed once more asserted their supremacy: the generalship of Stilicho, the trained bowmen and pikemen of the reorganized Roman army, the native and foederate squadrons whose array flanked the legions, were insufficient to arrest the Gothic charge. For years the conquerors rode at their will through Italy: when they quitted it, it was by their own choice, for there were no troops left in the world who could have expelled them by force.

The day of infantry had in fact gone by in Southern Europe: they continued to exist, not as the core and strength of the army, but for various minor purposes,--to garrison towns or operate in mountainous countries. Roman and barbarian alike threw their vigour into the organization of their cavalry. Even the duty of acting as light troops fell into the hands of the horsemen. The Roman trooper added the bow to his equipment, and in the fifth century the native force of the Empire had come to resemble that of its old enemy, the Parthian state of the first century, being composed of horsemen armed with bow and lance. Mixed with these horse-archers fought squadrons of the Foederati, armed with the lance alone. Such were the troops of Aetius and Ricimer, the army which faced the Huns on the plain of Chalons.

The Huns themselves were another manifestation of the strength of cavalry; formidable by their numbers, their rapidity of movement, and the constant rain of arrows which they would pour in without allowing their enemy to close. In their tactics they were the prototypes of the hordes of Alp Arslan, of Genghiz, and Tamerlane. But mixed with the Huns

in the train of Attila marched many subject German tribes, Herules and Gepidæ, Scyri, Lombards, and Rugians, akin to the Goths alike in their race and their manner of fighting. Chalons then was fought by horse-archer and lancer against horse-archer and lancer, a fair conflict with equal weapons. The Frankish allies of Aetius were by far the most important body of infantry on the field, and these were ranged, according to the traditional tactics of Rome, in the centre:--flanked on one side by the Visigothic lances, on the other by the imperial array of horse-archers and heavy cavalry intermixed. The victory was won, not by superior tactics, but by sheer hard fighting, the decisive point having been the riding down of the native Huns by Theodoric's heavier horsemen.

To trace out in detail the military meaning of all the wars of the fifth century does not fall within our province. As to the organization of the Roman armies a few words will suffice. In the West the Foederati became the sole force of the empire, so that at last one of their chiefs, breaking through the old spell of the Roman name, could make himself, in title as well as in reality, ruler of Italy. In the East, the decline of the native troops never reached this pitch. Leo I (457–474 A.D.), taking warning by the fate of the Western Empire, determined on increasing the proportion of Romans to Foederati, and carried out his purpose, though it involved the sacrifice of the life of his benefactor, the Gothic patrician Aspar. Zeno (474–491) continued this work, and made himself noteworthy as the first emperor who utilised the military virtues of the Isaurians, or semi-Romanized mountaineers of the interior of Asia Minor. Not only did they

form his imperial guard, but a considerable number of new corps were raised among them. Zeno also enlisted Armenians and other inhabitants of the Roman frontier of the East, and handed over to his successor Anastasius an army in which the barbarian element was adequately counterpoised by the native troops.

The victorious armies of Justinian were therefore composed of two distinct elements, the foreign auxiliaries serving under their own chiefs, and the regular imperial troops. The pages of Procopius give us sufficient evidence that in both these divisions the cavalry was by far the most important arm. The light horseman of the Asiatic provinces wins his especial praise. With body and limbs clothed in mail, his quiver at his right side and his sword at his left, the Roman trooper would gallop along and discharge his arrows to front or flank or rear with equal ease. To support him marched in the second line the heavier squadrons of the subsidized Lombard, or Herule, or Gepidan princes, armed with the lance. ‘There are some,’ writes Procopius, ‘who regard antiquity with wonder and respect, and attach no special worth to our modern military institutions: it is, however, by means of the latter that the weightiest and most striking results have been obtained.’ The men of the sixth century were, in fact, entirely satisfied with the system of cavalry tactics which they had adopted, and looked with a certain air of superiority on the infantry tactics of their Roman predecessors.

Justinian’s army and its achievements were indeed worthy of all praise; its victories were its own, while its defeats were generally due to the wretched policy of the