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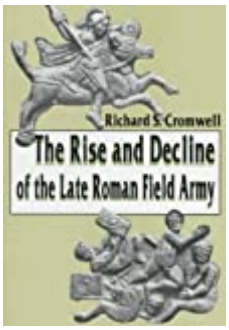

Richard S. Cromwell. *The Rise and Decline of the Late Roman Field Army.* Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing, 1998. ix + 79 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-087-1.

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The Late Roman Field Army (and *just* the field army!)

Richard Cromwell, branching out considerably from his previous scholarly works on modern German history, attempts here to survey, in very brief compass, the origins and consequences of the development of the Roman comitatensis, or mobile field army, from approximately 280 A.D. to the end of the western Roman Empire in 476. Cromwell sticks close to his subject, the field army, passing over current debates on Roman strategy and the socio-cultural role of the imperial frontier.[1] In five short chapters (not including a prologue and a conclusion), Cromwell traces the changes in administrative structure, deployment, and, most importantly, the composition of the mobile field army, from Diocletian's formalization of that organization through its dissolution in the west.

Cromwell, relying heavily on Ammianus, Zosimus, and the recent interpretive structure provided by Emilienne Demougeot, provides a continuous narrative of the military events of his period, positioning the changes in army structure into that narrative.[2] In general, Cromwell deals exclusively with the army between the mouth of the Rhine and Constantinople, only occasionally mentioning Africa, Britain, or Asia. Furthermore, towards the end of the book the eastern portion of the empire drops out, with the explanation that it maintained a more successful system of defense. Cromwell turns instead to the relatively rapid decline of the western empire, particularly under Honorius (with Stilicho as the military commander) and his immediate successors.

It is also important to note that Cromwell ignores the Limitanei, the old army as converted to border troops, save for noting their occasional use as pools of recruits for the comitatensis. Nor is this a book about arms, armor, or tactics. Cromwell sticks to his title: the field army.

Cromwell's thesis is that the mobile field army (and consequently, although not explicitly, "defense-in-depth" a la Luttwak) was a workable concept of defense for as long as the army incorporated Germans into Roman-like units (auxilia) under Roman discipline and alongside traditional Roman heavy infantry (the legions). This system, however, pressured by civil war and then ruptured by the disaster at Adrianople, did not survive. Valens, and then Theodosius, resorted to using Germans as allied or feder-

ate troops, under their own commanders and their own military system. The "Roman" portions of the field army, increasingly ignored and suffering from systemic corruption, finally dissolved, although not without a successful role in stopping Attila at Chalons.

The question of the presence and role of the barbarians in the Roman army is an important one, but it is not clear that Cromwell's approach suffices to solve the problem. Cromwell hopes that by analyzing the shifting organizational structure of the field army–that is, the various ratios of auxilia, legions, and later of federates (to put it in simple terms)–that he can make conclusions about the relationship between "Romanness," "Germanness," and military efficiency. To this organizational argument he adds anecdotal references to support generalizations about demoralization in the Roman components of the army and of a growing German sense of military superiority that left them less amenable to Roman discipline (p. 27). His organizational argument is well presented, holds together, and operates from a good grasp of the secondary literature on that subject (given the brevity of the work).

His comments about morale and the relative sense of military superiority are scantily supported, however, and pose exactly the kind of questions that lead into the literature on the nature of the frontier that Cromwell ignores. He acknowledges the long history of Germans in the Roman army, emphasizing instead the qualitative difference between their initial role as auxilia and later as federates. One is never comfortable, however, with Cromwell's rather presumptive hard-line distinction between "Germans" and "Romans."

It is precisely in this area where reference to the debates on the nature of the frontier might have been useful. Cromwell, for example, does not refer to C. R. Whittaker's important work on the frontier, uses archaeological evidence only incidentally, and in fact neglects all of the publications associated with the International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies.

Visually, Cromwell's work is hampered by extremely poor graphic presentation. The sole map, while not exactly illegible, is extremely difficult to use. The few illustrations in the middle of the book seem to be poor photocopies from other works, and most of them relate to a relatively unimportant discussion of a particular auxilium–the Cornuti. A further graphic shortcoming may be found in the otherwise useful organizational tables which are, unfortunately, unnumbered, and whose captions run together with the body of the text.

In short, Cromwell's work has value, if for no other reason than its brevity and clarity in discussing the extremely complex changes in the military structure of the late Roman army, but for $40, there are better options. General military historians, in particular, would be better served by Edward Luttwak's more comprehensive study.

Notes

[1]. Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986); Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Everett L. Wheeler, "Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy," *Journal of Military History* 57 (1993), 7-42 and 215-240.

[2]. Emilienne Demougeot, *La Formation De L'Europe Et Les Invasions Barbares* (Paris: Aubier, 1979).

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