

Theo VIJGEN, *The Cultural Parameters of the Graeco-Roman War Discourse*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, 724 p., 120 €, ISBN 9782503586472.

The aims of Theo Vijgen's book are very ambitious: to identify and describe the ideas that the ancient Greeks and Romans held about warfare, and to trace a development in the way of thinking about war in antiquity. These aims are even more ambitious considering both the chronological spectrum, more than 1.000 years (from *ca* 750 BC to AD 500), and the number and variety of the ancient sources used, which include literary and also iconographic evidence.

As far as the issue concerning the cultural basis of the war discourse is concerned, this work is not exactly new. It is sufficient to consider Victor Davis Hanson's *The Western Way of War* (Berkeley, 1989), which was a landmark contribution, or his *Carnage and Culture* (New York, 2001), but also John Keegan's *The Face of Battle* (London, 1976) and *A History of Warfare* (London, 1993), finally John Lynn's *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture* (Cambridge Mass., 2003), which was the first study to fully focus on the cultural approach in war history. The real novelty of Vijgen's study is the detailed historical analysis, which led him to write a long book of more than 700 pages, of which no less than 60 made up of bibliography. Most of the references are English publications, but this is a problem for all scientific and academic works written in this language.

The book is based on the dissertation the A. wrote to obtain his Ph.D. in History at the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels (2018, p. 15). He probably made few changes for the publication, with the risk of confusing the less knowledgeable reader —think of students of classics with little experience in this field— with the quantity of data and especially bibliographical references, which I defy anyone to check one by one.

The vastness of the chronological spectrum highlights A.'s historical knowledge and uncommon ability to navigate ancient political and social issues. Using a logical and entirely suitable method, the A. divides the book into 9 chapters, with an introduction (p. 15-60) and conclusion pages (p. 621-636). In the introduction (chap. 1) he gives an account of the history of studies devoted to the cultural parameters of the Graeco-Roman war discourse, and explains what his analysis actually consists of, illustrating his working method. Chap. 2 is devoted to the Greek ways of war and its development from the early phase to agonal warfare. In chap. 3 the A. discusses the

cultural parameters of warfare in the Hellenistic age, dwelling on the main themes that emerge from the literary sources, particularly: military excellence, agonal warfare, liberty and Greek superiority, competition, and commemoration. Most of the book focuses on the war in Rome. This is inevitable, considering both the number of testimonies and their variety, and especially the chronological spectrum. Therefore, if chap. 4 reserves few pages for Early Rome (*ca* 750-290 BC) —this is normal, considering that this period was more mythical than historical— more attention is dedicated to the years of the Mid (chap. 5, 290-120 BC), and the Late Republic (chap. 6, 120-27 BC). The age of the Roman Empire is divided into the Augustan period (chap. 7, 27 BC-AD 14), which rightly deserves special attention as it is a period of change as well as the basis for the developments of the following centuries, Early Empire (chap. 8, AD 14-193), up to the civil war of 193-96 and the beginning of the Severan Dynasty, the third century (chap. 9, AD 193-*ca* 360), and finally Late Empire (*ca* AD 360-500), which sees the emergence and affirmation of Christian themes.

The strength of the book is that it identifies themes that were constant throughout the very long historical period considered, and which could fit both the agonal reality of the Greek *poleis* and the affirmation of the *virī militares* in Late Roman Empire. These are the themes of loyalty, *virtus*, *disciplina*, victory, superiority. The A. then adds specific topics on the basis of the historical and literary contexts of reference, *e.g.* clemency — which is an inescapable topic when speaking of Caesar's wars and his *Commentarii*— or the concept of *patria*, which beginning with Augustus is identified with the emperor himself and is directly connected to the concept of “Romanization”, or *pax*, which marks the first phase of the development of a Christian war ethic.

Are these parameters sufficient to outline the history of the Greco-Roman war discourse? They are the main ones but not the only ones. We should take, for instance, the concept of *τύχη/fortuna*, as well as the complementary notion of *πρόνοια/providentia*, to which Plutarch devoted an entire work of his *Moralia*, posing a fundamental question for those reflecting on the wars of the Greeks and Romans. He starts from the conviction that there is only one community of people, which recognises itself in the cultural and civil models which were elaborated by Greek thought and then inherited and spread by the Romans throughout the Empire. He also believes that the mission of the Romans is to build a world where the common ideals and aspirations of all humanity can be realised: peace, liberty, economic prosperity, population growth, and agreement (*Praecepta gerendae rei publicae*, 824C). Reflecting on the concept of *τύχη/fortuna*, his question, therefore, is: does Rome dominate the world with its weapons thanks to luck (*κατὰ τύχην*) or —as Plutarch himself believes— by obeying a providential design (*κατὰ πρόνοιαν*)? (*De fortuna Romanorum*, 316E). If we consider this carefully, the same position will be present, albeit in a different key, in Christian historiography, if at the beginning of the 5th century Orosius states: *per omnia venturi Christi praeparatum Caesaris imperium* (« Caesar's empire was prepared in every respect for the coming of Christ »: *Historia adversus paganos* 6.20.4).

Another key concept, I believe, is fundamental in any study dealing with the cultural parameters of the war discourse that cut across Greek and Roman culture: the concept of *ἐμπειρία/peritia*, only partly overlapping with that of *disciplina*, which is largely present in the book. For example, all the crucial phases of the Peloponnesian War described by Thucydides are marked by the valour of the *ἐμπειρία*, both of the soldiers and especially of the generals. On the Roman side, the remarks of Flavius Josephus on the Roman-Jewish conflict are noteworthy for this topic: no amount of courage or valour could have compensated for the inferiority of an assault of inexperienced against experts, of disordered masses against men in compact ranks, of desperate men feigned by fury against disciplined troops (*The Jewish War*, 3.13-15).

These details are just some of the food for thought that the book instils. Considering the approach and method in general, the ambitious aim of the book is also its limitation. As Jeremy Black rightly states in « Determinism and Other Issues » (*The Journal of Military History*, 68/4, 2004, p. 1217-1219), a detailed work on the cultural approach of war discourse cannot be carried out on a global scale. Something gets lost along the way. First of all, one loses awareness that literary sources are not all the same and cannot be treated in the same way, but instead each of them belongs to a genre, which has its own tradition, rules and norms, which are precise and codified over time. Secondly, one loses touch with the diachronic dimension of phenomena, so that if we can speak of agonal warfare specifically for the Greek *poleis*, we should not forget that the Roman Empire acted —as Plutarch teaches us— from a cultural perspective that was not only Roman, but Greco-Roman. Therefore, one loses sight of the fact that literary sources are part of a tradition, i.e. a process of transmission and selection. In summary, if we are able to read the most significant sources of Greek and Roman history, we must remember —and above all make it clear to our readers— that it is not possible to read everything; for example, all the *Histories* of Polybius or all the *Ab Urbe condita libri* by Livy or the entire works of Sallust or Tacitus. Limiting ourselves again to the area of historiography, we can observe *Brill's New Jacoby* or the collection of fragments of the Roman historians by Tim Cornell. Finally —an omission that, I believe, is the most noteworthy in a work that deals with war discourse— we should not omit military literature, which conveys not only technical precepts of strategy, tactics or poliorcetics, but also many culturally important key concepts. For this reason, alongside Vegetius, who is a deservedly quoted and discussed author in this book, we should also consider Philo of Byzantium or Asclepiodotus or Aelian Tacticus and Arrian's *Tactica* and *Acies contra Alanos*. Above all, we should not forget Onasander, a Greek author of strategy that wrote in the years of Claudius' reign, who with his *Strategikos* makes a *σύγκρισις* of those Greek and Roman cultural values that supported the Romans' way of warfare.

However, I am sure that this omission is intentional and therefore I look forward to another work by Vijgen, which will certainly be no less extensive and in-depth than this book.

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