

Christoph Haack, Die Krieger der Karolinger. Kriegsdienste als Prozesse gemeinschaftlicher Organisation um 800, Berlin, Boston, MA (De Gruyter) 2020, X–273 S. (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, 115), ISBN 978-3-11-062614-8, EUR 109,95.

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This is both a brave and an ambitious reappraisal of military service in the Carolingian period. Christoph Haack tackles the three principal grand narratives of the history of warfare in the early middle ages that have read military activity as underpinned by »feudalism«, conducted by »warbands«, or mounted in order to secure booty and plunder. Haack usefully summarises ideological and conceptual thinking about military service, the possible influence of classical ideas, and the discussions of the social impact of supporting a soldier, touching as it does on hoary old chestnuts such as feudalism, lordship and military obligation and loyalty. He stresses instead social bonding and political power structures that included the nobility. He argues that past historiography on warfare and military organisation in the early middle ages has stemmed from different assumptions about the role of the state, the degree to which political power was privatized, and conceptions of the »transition« from late antiquity to the middle ages.

Past discussion, moreover, has tended to polarise perceptions of the central issues as public versus private power, state versus nobility, the linking of fiefs and vassals with military obligation, the characterisation of fighting forces as either the specialist retinues of local lords or as royal musters, and arguments about infantry as opposed to cavalry. Such perceptions can be seen as formed against the backdrop of modern military conflict, not least the Franco-Prussian, and Second World Wars, or the Balkan and Middle Eastern wars of the past three decades.

To a considerable degree (albeit not comprehensively), Haack also exposes how discussion of military matters in German and Anglophone scholarship in particular has sometimes proceeded in parallel lines with only occasional engagement or notice taken of alternative arguments. Thus, some major developments and caveats, not least in matters of interpretation of such vital categories of evidence as the texts generally labelled »capitularies«, have been insufficiently taken into account. My own earlier work, for example, has suggested that the handful of such »capitularies« related to military matters seems to indicate that military service depended on particular circumstances or specific strategic needs, and that the documents themselves need to be understood as very



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specific injunctions in relation to particular campaigns rather than as rules applying consistently over many decades.

Haack himself subjects the standard »capitulary« evidence to fresh critical analysis and pushes the arguments further. He also deploys effective assessments of, for example, Einhard's letters, the career and service to the young Louis the Pious in Aquitaine of »John the Spaniard« and his family, and the implications of the manuscript transmission of the so-called »Wormser Corpus« of 829 concerning military service, with significant results.

Haack insists that the crucial framework for military action is provided by the Carolingian social networks which facilitated political action. He argues convincingly that the »capitularies« concerning military matters should not be understood as programmatic general statements but as letters, messages about particular crises, advice to be followed and memoranda emanating from the ruler. Simon MacLean, moreover, has made a strong case for the Edict of Pîtres not being a legislative pronouncement intended to have general effect but a particular attempt on Charles the Bald's part to get his magnates to cooperate in the building of a specific form of defence¹. This echoes the important observations Haack makes about the documents relating to military activity being part of the process of activating the network of fighting men to assemble an army when needed for specific occasions.

A crucial aspect of Haack's argument, indeed, is the emphasis he places on the role of literacy and written communication as important tools for conducting war. His analysis of the four versions of the »Wormser Corpus« of 829, for example, demonstrates how orders concerning military matters were discussed, communicated and copied for onward transmission, and how practical adjustments were made at a local level. Written communication, in short, was an essential tool for activating the network of military support to assemble an army, and a script-based technique for resolving problems.

Generally, Haack makes a strong case for military service as a process of community organisation, with the most useful underlying principle being the working of client/patron relationships. He therefore proposes that the obligation to do military service should no longer be seen simply in terms of public levy or private military following but as a matter of continuous negotiation in which the two elements of public authority and private response are intertwined. But the role of the king remains fundamental. Rather than a standing army of professional warriors, the *homines libri* who went to war for the king as king, not as a »feudal« lord, numbered fighting skills among their many activities. They had a variety of socio-economic



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¹ Simon MacLean, The Edict of Pîtres, Carolingian Defence Against the Vikings, and the Origins of Medieval Castle, in: Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 30 (2020), p. 29–54.

origins, and were part of a political order in which personal connections and community action were integrated into many-layered social and political structures.

Further elements of the social networks and personal connections that this book emphasises can perhaps be set beside work on the many-faceted links between monasteries and local communities, and on the bonds of both kinship and spiritual kinship. Certainly, there was a high value placed on martial skill and valour, though Haack does not venture into the discussions of »masculinity« in the Carolingian world, recently explored by Rachel Stone.

There are more questions to be explored, not the least of which is why military strength was, or needed to be, so nurtured in Carolingian society at particular points of its history? Was there a consistent purpose in maintaining members of the population who possessed fighting skills? Conversely, how much effort was actually spent on avoiding direct conflict and maintaining peace? It is a virtue of Haack's book that it reinvigorates such topics and that it is notably sensitive to the multifarious strands – economic, political, social and cultural – that need to be woven into any discussion of the role of military service in the Carolingian world.

Mittelalter – Moyen Âge (500–1500)

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