EUROPEAN MILITARY HISTORY – Postclassical Period

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Overview Throughout the post classical period in Europe, the Middle Ages, there was a slowly growing development of larger and more coherent social units; not yet states in the modern sense, even at the end of the postclassical period, but coherent language and culture units which resembled the states to be of France, Italy, Spain, England, and Germany**.** As these coherent units grew, representing as they did coagulations of capital and assets--as in the powerful centers of Feudalism--it became increasingly necessary to provide effective defence machineries for centers of settlement, just as, in the late Mediaeval period, hungry and aggressive nomadic groups--the Magyars, the Huns, the Mongoils, the Vikings--staged frequent aggressions against settled communities, thus helping to hone the arts of attack machinery.

Warfare in Theory   The military textbook of prime importance, throughout the post classical period, was Renatus' *De Re Militari*, *On Military Affairs*, composed in the 4th century C.E. On the whole--and this betrays the lag time between theory and the growing practice of the period--Renatus formulates a guidebook for successful military practice. He recommends that the infantry be considered the core of the army, and that generals should initiate battle only when they are sure of winning. Pitched battles were to be discouraged, and were in fact rare. This textbook, influential still in the fifteenth century, though long supplanted by skills and materials on the ground, was still being ordered into translation by Henry VII of England, in the fifteenth century--evidence of the distance theory was behind both the growing technologies of defensive and proactive warfare.

Defensive warfare The evolution of walled cities, in the post classical period, made for styles of warfare sharply different from those in the Greco-Roman period. Against invaders it was important to oppose the most impregnable possible defense, which was becoming the *castle.* Throughout Europe castles sprang up wherever there was a considerable Feudal community, and with time these castles became harder to breach. The best engineers of the times were recruited for castle construction, and made regular advances in such technologies as drawbridge construction, the creation of heavily fortified walls, the assurance of a long term fresh water supply within the castle precinct, the construction of hidden wall slits for arrow or crossbow shooting, and the perfection of the resources needed for pouring down cascades of boiling water or hot lava on the heads of the enemy.

Siege warfare   The obverse of defensive warfare, of course, was siege warfare, the most common form of organized military aggression in the post classical period. This kind of assault procedure demanded money, time, and expertise, just as did the defensive strategies of the castle. New devices were invented for scaling castle walls, for battering foundations, for hurling catapults, and, In the final centuries of the post classical period in Europe, for employing cannon and gunpowder, with increasing accuracy and effect. While the initial introduction of gunpowder into Europe can be credited to Mongols working from China, by the fifteenth century European gunpowder manufacture was well developed on its own.

Recruiting and soldiery   The manpower behind the above warfare forms was throughout the Mediaeval period recruited along lines dictated by the social agencies involved. For a long time there survived the ancient Greco Roman practice by which citizens saw to their own arming, and considered it part of their individual duties to prepare for and enter into the military actions of the community. This involved considerable outlays of personal expenditure for armor, a practice which survived at many points in the Middle Ages, when knights supplied themselves and their feudal retinues with armor and cavalry for a large number of supporters. There were at the same time, throughout the later Middle Ages, occasions on which ever larger communities, small cities, found themselves obliged to finance standing armies, as supports for the entire community.

Reading

DeVries, Kelly, Mediaeval Military Technology, Peterborough, 1992.

Nicholson, Helen, *Mediaeval Warfare: Theory and Practice of War In Europe, 300-1500*, Basingstoke, 2004.

Discussion questions

How long did sieges of individual castles last? What kinds of preparation did the besieged citizens have to make, for prolonged survival inside castle walls?

What was the effect of the introduction of gunpowder into Feudal society? What effect did it have on city planning and defensive protection?

What was the role of the clergy, during the repeated military actions of the Middle Ages in Europe? Was there protest against warfare?