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## Warfare of the Gepid Kingdom

### Abstract

*In the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, after the battle of Nedao river in 454, the new, independent kingdom of Gepid was established. The Gepids and their allies, led by King Ardarich, won a decisive victory over the army of the Hun ruler Bleda. The new Germanic state lasted for approximately one hundred and fifteen years and fought numerous wars with its neighbours during its short history. In these armed conflicts, the Gepids were confronted by hostile peoples with different fighting styles, which influenced the fighting style of the Gepids. The aim of my thesis is to present the characteristics of the Gepid kingdom's warfare and their application in their armed conflicts.*

*Keywords: medieval warfare, military cultures, Germanic peoples, Gepids, Eastern Roman Empire*

### Introduction

After the death of Attila, the king of the Huns, a feud broke out in his kingdom. His successors wanted to divide up his inheritance, and the situation was suitable for the Gepid king Ardarich.<sup>2</sup> According to the Germanic ruler, the time was come to gain independence from the Huns, then he gathered allies and launched an uprising.<sup>3</sup> The Huns and their subjects, led by Ellac,<sup>4</sup> Attila's eldest son, marched against the Gepids. The two armies met near the Nedao River<sup>5</sup> and in this battle, the Gepids won a decisive victory over the Huns.<sup>6</sup>

After the victory, Ardarich, the victorious Gepid king, founded a new Germanic kingdom in the eastern part of the Carpathian Basin. The geography of the new Gepid state was important. To the east were the neighbours of the Steppe peoples and the newly arrived Slavs, to the south their territory was bordered by the Eastern Roman/

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<sup>2</sup> Ardarich was a Gepid king (r. 447–455).

<sup>3</sup> Kiss 2015: 75; BÓNA et al. 1993: 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ellac, son of Attila, was a king of the Huns (r. 353–354).

<sup>5</sup> Nedao river, its exact location is unknown, mentioned only by the Gothic historian Jordanes.

<sup>6</sup> Kiss 2015: 75–76; BÓNA et al. 1993: 27.

Byzantine Empire, to the west lived other Germanic peoples, the most important of which were the Eastern Goths<sup>7</sup> and later the Lombards.<sup>8</sup> This location meant that the Gepid kingdom was simultaneously situated alongside several different military cultures. The Gepid leadership had to find a response to the potential threat of different warlike opponents, which had an impact on the development of their warfare. In my article I seek to answer the question of what characteristics the Gepid military culture had and how it was influenced by the warfare habits of the peoples living in its neighbourhood.

## The structure of the Gepid army

When we examine the Gepid warfare, we have to take into consideration that relatively few written sources have survived on their fighting methods. It is therefore important to analyse and research analogies with other Germanic peoples. It is important to note, however, that Germanic warfare had many elements in common, but they cannot be considered completely homogeneous.<sup>9</sup>

The first Gepid campaigns, according to written sources, took place in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. One such reference is found in Jordanes<sup>10</sup> *De origine actibusque Getarum*, also known as the *Getica*. According to the Gothic historian, the Gepid ruler Fastida<sup>11</sup> incited his people and then led his army against the surrounding peoples, extending the borders of his territory by force of arms. In the course of the wars, he won great victories over the Burgundians<sup>12</sup> but also successfully brought other tribes under his rule.<sup>13</sup>

In these campaigns, the elite warriors of the Gepid army, who served in the various warlord and royal military escorts, played an important role. This important component of the Germanic armies was described by Tacitus<sup>14</sup> in his work *Germania*. The Roman historian reported that young warriors joined the ranks of prominent Germanic warlords and kings serving their war aims in exchange for provisions and spoils.<sup>15</sup> The basis of their loyalty was the wealth what they received from their warlord. It is important to note, however, that these warriors were neither mercenaries nor vassals, but a third type, a group that included both of their characteristics. The retinue fought for loot and supplies also appears in the epic poem *Beowulf*. In one scene of the heroic poem, written by unknown authors, the main character, King

<sup>7</sup> East Germanic people from the Baltic Sea region. They founded a kingdom in Italy in end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> The Lombards are a West Germanic people from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. They founded a kingdom in Italy in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> MACDOWALL-McBRIDE 1996: 3–4.

<sup>10</sup> Jordanes (? – circa 550) Eastern Roman bureaucrat, claimed to be of Gothic descent, who became a historian later in life.

<sup>11</sup> Fastida was a Gepid king in the 3<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>12</sup> The Burgundians were an eastern germanic people whose original homeland lay on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea.

<sup>13</sup> JORDANES 2004: 66 (97).

<sup>14</sup> Publius Cornelius Tacitus (55/56–117/120) was a Roman historian.

<sup>15</sup> TACITUS 1961: 55–56 (14).

Beowulf<sup>16</sup> and his twelve chosen warriors set out against a dragon because the monster was destroying his country. During the clash, his retinue deserted him and fled, leaving only a soldier named Wiglaf at his side. The basis of his loyalty was wealth, land and armaments what he received from the king.<sup>17</sup> Tacitus also emphasises the close relationship between the members of the retinue and the warlord. According to the Roman historian, it was a disgrace for the members of the retinue not to fight well in battle and to survive the death of the leader.<sup>18</sup> The size of the retinue depended on the success of the military commander and the loot and revenue he distributed. In *Beowulf*, such a successful commander was King Hrothgar.<sup>19</sup> The scyld ruler, the heroic poem tells us, was able to increase the number of his retinue, as Fastida could, through his successful campaigns and spoils.<sup>20</sup>

These professional warriors were also found elsewhere among Germanic peoples, for example among the Visigoths,<sup>21</sup> where these warriors were called *saiones* in the sources.<sup>22</sup> The *Codex Euricianus*, an early medieval code of law, regulated their rights.<sup>23</sup> According to Austrian historian Herwig Wolfram, these warriors were personally free under the law, and could keep the weapons they received from their *patronus*, even if they joined the escort of another warlord. In addition, the German historian also mentions that the property and chattels which these soldiers acquired during their service remained in the possession of the warlord who employed them when they left.<sup>24</sup> Like the Visigoths, the Lombard kings and princes (*ducēs*) also employed free professional warriors in their retinues. These soldiers were known as *gasindi*.<sup>25</sup> In the Merovingian Frankish kingdom such elite warriors also served the rulers. The name used for them was *antrustiones*.<sup>26</sup> These free warriors served alongside the nobility and the Germanic kings, according to the sources, thus commonly were found in Germanic military culture. Their task was to ensure the personal security of their patron, in addition when necessary, and to deal with unexpected military tasks and guard the estate and the property of the warlord.<sup>27</sup>

The sources do not mention Gepid mercenaries. However, analogies suggest that such an elite group of warriors existed in the Gepid army. As the example of King Hrothgar shows, in the case of Fastida, many may have joined him and the Gepidian nobles because they wanted the spoils from successful campaigns. Winning battles and the spoils increased the number of professional warriors who joined him. The situation may have been similar during the existence of the Gepid kingdom. According to Jordanes, after defeating the Huns, the Gepids demanded an annual tribute from

<sup>16</sup> Semi-legendary scandinavian hero and king from the 5–6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>17</sup> *Beowulf* 1996: (2602–2609) 70, (2633–2660) 70–71.

<sup>18</sup> TACITUS 1961: 55–56 (14).

<sup>19</sup> Semi-legendary scyld (Danish) king. The date of his reign is uncertain, sometime in the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>20</sup> *Beowulf* 1996: (64–67) 4.

<sup>21</sup> Also known as the Tervingi (Forest) Goths; they founded a kingdom in the 5<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Spain and south-western France.

<sup>22</sup> WOLFRAM 1988: 241.

<sup>23</sup> *Codex Euricianus* 2020: CCCXI.

<sup>24</sup> WOLFRAM 1988: 241.

<sup>25</sup> BÓNA et al. 1993: 66.

<sup>26</sup> HALSALL 2003: 48.

<sup>27</sup> BODA 2023: 49–53.

the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire, which Emperor Marcian<sup>28</sup> granted them.<sup>29</sup> This regular source of income provided the Gepid ruler and his nobles a large and capable professional military elite for a long period of time.

In the campaigns of the Germanic peoples, such as the Gepids, not only the professional warriors took part, but also other groups of the society. The majority of armies were made up of smaller sections of people who were linked by a common kinship or territorial connection. Caius Iulius Caesar<sup>30</sup> faced the warriors of Ariovistus<sup>31</sup> in his war in Gaul in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. The Germanic general's army was large and heterogeneous. Caesar later reports in his *De bello gallico* that the warriors of the Germanic army did not mix, but took their places in the battle formation separated by tribes.<sup>32</sup> The Roman historian, Tacitus reported in *Germania* that the units and formations of Germanic armies were not random groupings in the battles but communities of related people.<sup>33</sup> This system, according to written sources, remained a feature of Germanic warfare in later times. Based on sources, it was also the basis for the organisation of Germanic armies in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Maurice,<sup>34</sup> in his work *Strategikon*<sup>35</sup> described this observation. In the chapter on the warfare of other cultures, in the section on the "fair-haired peoples",<sup>36</sup> the Eastern Roman/Byzantine emperor noted that the armies were not organised into strict military formations but into tribes, by kinship and by sympathy.<sup>37</sup> The members of this social group were free in their personalities, taking part in warfare only on a temporary, non-professional basis. These armed actions should have been campaigns of plunder or conquest, or armed efforts to defend their own territory. It is important to note that although they were not professional fighters, they were well-equipped and battle-hardened.

The sources did not mention specifically this element of the Gepid military organisation. However, the abovementioned analogies suggest that the Gepids, like other Germanic peoples, had similar military structure. In addition to the warriors serving in the retinues of the warlords, there were also a large number of free, non-professional men-at-arms in the army. As with other Germanic peoples, they could go to war in small groups, organised by territorial and kinship based military units. These smaller groups, warbands, like other contemporary Germanic armies, might formed the majority of the Gepid army.

In the ancient and early medieval period, several types of branches were developed in Germanic armies. For these peoples, the distribution of military branches was not homogenous but varying from case to case. Tacitus, in his work *Germania* distinguished the Germanic tribes on the basis of their specific military branches.

<sup>28</sup> Marcian (Greek: Μαρκιανός) Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire (r. 450–457).

<sup>29</sup> JORDANES 2004: 95 (264).

<sup>30</sup> Caius Iulius Caesar (100–44 BC) was a Roman general and statesman.

<sup>31</sup> Ariovistus was a Germanic, Suebian prince who crossed the Rhine with his army in 72 BC and conquered large areas of Gaul. In 58 BC he engaged Caesar, but was defeated in battle. The exact date of his birth and death is unknown.

<sup>32</sup> CAESAR 1964: 19 (I. 51).

<sup>33</sup> TACITUS 1961: 61 (7).

<sup>34</sup> Maurice (Greek: Μαυρίκιος) was the emperor of the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire (r. 582–602).

<sup>35</sup> Στρατηγικόν (Greek).

<sup>36</sup> That is about the Germanic peoples.

<sup>37</sup> Maurikiosz 2023: 175 (10. 3).

According to the Roman historian, the army of Chatti<sup>38</sup> was primarily made up of infantry, which was disciplined and well organised.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, the Tencteri<sup>40</sup> had a more important role for the cavalry, which, like the Chatti's infantry, was a powerful and disciplined military force.

By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the development of the cavalry of the eastern Germanic peoples were strongly influenced by the cavalry of the Steppe peoples, during which the Germanic peoples had introduced new tactical elements and weaponry into their own combat system. One of the geographical contact points between the two military cultures was the Carpathian Basin, where the Germanic Quadi<sup>41</sup> living north of the Danube and the Sarmatians<sup>42</sup> in the modern Great Hungarian Plain had developed close relations over the centuries, often fighting in alliance. Ammianus Marcellinus<sup>43</sup> drew parallels between the two peoples' cavalry warfare, and according to his source, they were able to work well together in a campaign because of the similarity of their fighting styles and weaponry. According to the Roman historian, Quadi horsemen wore typical Sarmatian military equipment, which included long lances and scaled armour.<sup>44</sup> The adoption of elements of Sarmatian heavy horse warfare, such as armour, the double-handed lances (*contus*) and the double-edged swords as sidearms (*spatha*), was not limited to the Quadi, but was also found among other Germanic peoples. The Goths also came into contact with the Sarmatians, who had a similar influence on their cavalry warfare, and adopted the tactical elements and innovations seen of the Quadi. The heavy cavalry, attacking in a closed order, became the main striking force of the Gothic armies, where warriors wore helmets and armour and charged towards the enemy with their lances held forward.<sup>45</sup> The cavalry of the Germanic peoples was not only influenced by the geographical links with the Steppe peoples. The Huns conquered a number of Germanic peoples, including the Ostrogoths and the Gepids, who later took part in the Huns' campaigns. The cavalry of the Germanic peoples of the Carpathian Basin and East Europe may have been further adapted to the Steppe peoples.<sup>46</sup>

These factors were also present among the Gepids, as among the Goths, and the existence of heavy cavalry can also be assumed. There are sporadic archaeological evidences of the existence of heavy cavalry of Steppe origin in the area of the former kingdom of Gepids, in the form of fragments of chain mail. Such pieces were found

<sup>38</sup> The Chatti were a West Germanic tribe whose name was last recorded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD.

<sup>39</sup> TACITUS 1961: 66 (30).

<sup>40</sup> Tencteri are a West Germanic people famous for their cavalry.

<sup>41</sup> The Quadi were a West Germanic, Suebian people lived north of the Danube, in modern Slovakia.

<sup>42</sup> The Sarmatians are a collective name for the Iranian equestrian peoples. They settled in the Carpathian Basin from the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

<sup>43</sup> Marcellinus (330–395) was a Roman historian.

<sup>44</sup> Marcellinus 1993: 142 (XVII. 12).

<sup>45</sup> WOLFRAM 1988: 303.

<sup>46</sup> KISS 2015: 60.

in grave 59 of the Hódmezővásár-Gorzsa cemetery,<sup>47</sup> grave 178 of the Kiszombor-B cemetery,<sup>48</sup> and grave 80,<sup>49</sup> and 89 of Szentes-Bereghát.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the heavy cavalry, another type of cavalry of Steppe origin was also likely existed, the cavalry archers. Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of a composite bow in tomb 126/128 of the Tiszapüspöki – Fehértó-part, which is located in the territory of the former Gepid kingdom. The burial contained the typical three-edged arrowheads and the bow-end plates of the Steppe peoples' style. The warrior who was buried in the tomb also had a double-edged straight sword (*spatha*). Three-edged arrowheads have also been found in other cemeteries in the Gepid area, but composite bow was only found at this graveyard.<sup>51</sup> In addition to archaeological finds, written sources also record the existence of the Gepid cavalry. In 517, after the fall of the Hun Empire, "Geta" cavalry appeared in the Balkans and raided and plundered the defenceless imperial provinces.<sup>52</sup>

Regarding the mounted cavalry, British historian David Nicolle argues that the Germanic cavalry of the period cannot be considered a true mounted cavalry, but rather a corps of essentially mounted foot soldiers rather than true horsemen.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, according to British historian Guy Halsall, these warriors were not mounted infantry, but cavalry that could be used in various situations, such as fighting on foot.<sup>54</sup> In the case of the Gepids, as with the Goths, the cavalry adopted many Steppe elements and could therefore be considered as true cavalry. However, they were expected to take their place in the ranks of the infantry, dismounting from their horses when the situation demanded it.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the cavalry, the Gepid army also included the infantry. According to *Strategikon* the Germanic infantry of the period set up their battlelines straight and dense.<sup>56</sup> This infantry formation was the shield wall, or phalanx, which suggests an infantry fighting in a closed order. The Gepid infantry is not specifically mentioned in the sources, but it is assumed that they used the fighting methods described by emperor Maurice. In addition, the use of the wedge-shaped columns described by Tacitus, the so-called "boar's head"<sup>57</sup> which is entirely an offensive formation, triangular in shape with the apex, where two warriors are seated facing the enemy's front line. Its main purpose is to break through the opponent's front line. Since the flanks of the "wild boar's head" were not protected against encirclement, these areas had to be secured by lightly armed infantry or cavalry. In this case, this formation was unable to break through the opponent's defensive line, so it was not sustainable.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>47</sup> CSALLÁNY 1961: 128.

<sup>48</sup> CSALLÁNY 1961: 182.

<sup>49</sup> CSALLÁNY 1961: 84–85.

<sup>50</sup> CSALLÁNY 1961: 80.

<sup>51</sup> MASEK – F. KOVÁCS 2022: 38–40.

<sup>52</sup> Marcellinus 1995: 39 (517).

<sup>53</sup> NICOLLE 2005: 8.

<sup>54</sup> HALSALL 2003: 188.

<sup>55</sup> MAURIKIOSZ 2023: 175 (10. 3).

<sup>56</sup> MAURIKIOSZ 2023: 175 (10. 3).

<sup>57</sup> TACITUS 1961: 66 (30).

<sup>58</sup> GRIFFITH 1995: 189.

According to Canadian historian Simon McDowall, in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries, Germanic infantrymen used square shields and spears to create a properly enclosed shield wall. Later, the armament of the Germanic infantry changed, using more throwing weapons and swords. According to McDowall's hypothesis, the use of these weapons required more space, the formation became more open, the shields became smaller, and the combat became more individualised.<sup>59</sup> It is noteworthy that the more open formation was less effective against the closed formation of the Roman infantry, and was more difficult to resist cavalry charges, in addition the smaller shields provided less protection against the enemy's long-range weapons. The use of longer swords does not require more space. *Spathas* were used both in mounted combat, on foot in battle and individually in duels. In these situations, there are differences in the use of weapons. Thus, in the case of a closed formation on foot, the swords must be used with a different technique and not to increase the distance. The use of throwing weapons may sometimes require a greater distance between them, but after the formation can be closed again. The use of other weapons, rather than changing the fighting style, could increase efficiency and improve tactical practices.

In summary, the Gepid army, like other Germanic peoples of this period, contained two types of warriors. The first, those who served in the various retinues by profession. Their salaries depended on the spoils of war or on the tribute they exacted. Free in person, according to written sources, they could leave if they were not satisfied with their warlord. Their duties included protecting the warlord's person, safeguarding his property and participating in his campaigns. The other type did not regard war as a profession, but only participated in it as a periodic activity. They were not bound by a permanent oath of allegiance to a warlord. These warriors were organised in small groups, based on territorial or kinship ties. They usually joined the campaigns for loot or other rewards, or in cases where the host territory had to be defended against enemy attack. The Germanic tribes were thus able to field armies of large numbers in relation to their population, because of the close relationship between the total number of free men and the number of warriors who could be mobilised.<sup>60</sup> The Gepid army included both cavalry and infantry. Some of the cavalry, probably adopting Steppe models, were heavy cavalry, whose members, according to contemporary sources, were able to fight on foot if the situation demanded. In addition to the heavy cavalry, it is also assumed that Steppe-style cavalrymen were used. The infantry also played a role in the campaigns of Gepids. This probably meant infantrymen fighting in a closed shield wall, which was also typical of the other Germanic peoples.

## Direct warfare in the Gepid military culture

Modern military science defines military culture as a set of historically developed spiritual and material values, a specific expression of certain concepts, aspirations and movements, but with specific means, purposes and functions directly related to

<sup>59</sup> MACDOWALL–MCBRIDE 1996: 32.

<sup>60</sup> KISS 2023: 91.



warfare. Their aim is to break up the cohesive forces of the enemy and to preserve the cohesion of their own troops. Military culture thus encompasses the habits, attitudes and criteria of a society in relation to war and the army. Military culture can be influenced by beliefs, prejudices and perceptions that can preserve but also shape and modify a culture's relationship to war and warfare.<sup>61</sup> According to Lieutenant General Jenő Kovács there are three types of military cultures which belong to direct or indirect warfare. The Hungarian military scientist distinguished between the movement-centric military culture, which is engaged in direct warfare, and the indirect material-centric, or guerrilla or partisan military culture.<sup>62</sup> In the modern era, the movement-centric military culture achieves its political goals by the occupation of territory and the destruction of opposing forces. The other type is the indirect form of warfare: the material-centric (regular) and guerrilla (irregular) military cultures. This method of warfare employs the exhaustion and overwhelming of the enemy.<sup>63</sup>

According to written sources that record the various armed conflicts fought by the Gepids, the primary way of fighting wars was direct warfare. The use of force is direct, with the aim of destroying the enemy's military force quickly and efficiently. The warfare of gepids is more mobile and generally avoids the siege of fortified places and cities.

In the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Gepid king Fastida, according to Jordanes, significantly extended the boundaries of the territories under his rule. According to the Gothic historian, he conquered many peoples, but among the conquered he mentions only the Burgundians.<sup>64</sup> Fastida, after his successes on the battlefield, turned against the Goths, planning to conquer lands from them.<sup>65</sup> According to an early medieval source, the Goths, led by King Ostrogotha,<sup>66</sup> confronted the attack of Gepids. The decisive battle between the two armies took place at the city of Galtis on the Auha river.<sup>67</sup> According to Jordanes, the two armies directly clashed in open battle. The battle lasted for a long time, between opponents of similar strength, and finally ended in victory for the Goths.<sup>68</sup> The text page reveals that the Gepid king used direct warfare in his campaigns and directly dealt with his opponents.

In his campaigns, the Gepid ruler used violence to seek decisive battles in order to achieve his political goals directly. Jordanes, in particular, gives a detailed account of the battle against the Goths, but he also describes that the Burgundians suffered heavy losses by the Gepid army, which also indicates that a decisive confrontation was fought. It can be assumed that the wars mentioned by Jordanes were fought in a similar way. According to British historian Halsall in contemporary warfare, the defending party, to compensate for its disadvantage in number and/or armament compared with the attacking party, sought out a place on the route of the invading army where the terrain was favourable to it. These were often high points, narrow

<sup>61</sup> KOVÁCS 1995: 17–18.

<sup>62</sup> KOVÁCS 1995: 22.

<sup>63</sup> FORGÁCS: 2009: 27; BODA 2021: 25–48.

<sup>64</sup> JORDANES 2004: 62 (97).

<sup>65</sup> JORDANES 2004: 62 (99).

<sup>66</sup> Ostrogotha was the king of Goths (? –290).

<sup>67</sup> JORDANES 2004: 62 (99).

<sup>68</sup> JORDANES 2004: 62 (99).



passages or river crossings.<sup>69</sup> In the case of the battle of the Auha, it can be assumed that the defending Gothic army took the natural advantages of the river. The attacking Gepid army may therefore have started the battle from a more disadvantaged position. Over the course of the long battle, Fastida was unable to break the Gothic army's resistance and achieve his goals. By the end of the battle, both armies may have suffered heavy losses. Jordanes also refers to the fact that at the end of the conflict Fastida retreated with his army but was not pursued by the Goths.

With the expansion of the Huns, the Gepids also became their subjects. The exact date of the conquest is uncertain, but it may have occurred sometime in the first decade of the 5<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>70</sup> The Huns used the military strength of the subject peoples, and the Gepids were involved in the campaigns of the Steppe empire. The Gepid warriors were also present in the 451 campaign led by Attila, the great king of Huns<sup>71</sup> against the Western Roman Empire.<sup>72</sup> In these campaigns the Gepids were part of a larger, complex army, but within it they fought as an independent contingent under the leadership of their king Ardarich. The Gepids, like the Huns as a whole, used direct warfare, aiming to destroy the enemy directly and quickly. This is what Jordanes alluded to in his description of the battle. According to the Gothic historian, King Attila said before the battle: "we must win a quick victory, that is the essence of war."<sup>73</sup>

A few years later, after Attila's death, the situation changed within the Hun Empire. According to Jordanes, the king's successors wanted to divide their father's inheritance, which would have been detrimental to King Ardarich and the Gepids, so the Germanic ruler decided to launch an uprising against the Huns' rule.<sup>74</sup> In this campaign, the Gepid king used the direct warfare he had been used to in the past to achieve his political goals. The two armies met at the Nedao River in 454. The course of the battle is not known, nor is it known which allied peoples were involved on the Hun and the Gepid side. Because the battle took place near a river, it may have influenced it and could have taken two forms. If the river separated the enemies, the offensive army had to find a crossing point to attack. In this case, it could have been the Huns, because they had to put down the uprising as soon as possible, and to do so, they had to attack, while the Gepids could have positioned along the river's defence lines. Just as the Gepids had previously been able to break the resistance by crossing the Auha river, the Huns could not break the resistance by crossing the river, and a possible strong counterattack by the Gepids might have put them between the river and the enemy. It was at this time that the Hun leader Ellac lost his life.<sup>75</sup> If the river ran perpendicular to the two armies, one flank of each side could be protected from being embraced. The Gepid army would have been in a less advantageous position, victory would have been harder, and the Huns would have suffered a decisive defeat and Ellac, Attila's son, would not have been left dead on the battlefield. Jordanes

<sup>69</sup> HALSALL 2003: 148.

<sup>70</sup> KISS 2015: 58.

<sup>71</sup> Attila was the great king of the Huns (r. 434–453).

<sup>72</sup> KISS 2015: 59.

<sup>73</sup> JORDANES 2004: 82 (205) "Inde nobis cita victoria quaerere, unde se continet bellum".

<sup>74</sup> JORDANES 2004: 94 (260).

<sup>75</sup> JORDANES: 95 (262).

also implied that the Huns and their allies had suffered heavy losses.<sup>76</sup> In that case, with open ground behind them, they could have fled, thus reducing casualties and allowing Ellac to survive the battle.

In 539, the relationship between the Gepid kingdom and the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire deteriorated. Around 536, the Gepids captured the former Roman city of Sirmium,<sup>77</sup> which was in Gothic hands and was claimed by Emperor Iustinian I.<sup>78</sup> The Gepids formed an alliance with the Frankish king Theudebert I<sup>79</sup> who was fighting in Italy against the emperor's troops.<sup>80</sup> The Gepid army launched an attack on the territory of the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire. In the face of the invading Germanic tribes, Calluc<sup>81</sup> *magister militum*<sup>82</sup> took the field. According to Marcellinus comes,<sup>83</sup> the general, who initially defended successfully, was eventually defeated by the Gepids and died in battle.<sup>84</sup> The course of the battle is not known. Marcellinus comes' account can be interpreted in several ways. The Roman commander Calluc may have been looking for a suitable field for the battle. When the Gepid army appeared, he could use this advantage to hold off and possibly repel the attacking Germans. The following day, the Roman army probably regrouped in the field and prepared for battle. The Gepid army could then resort to subterfuge to draw the Romans out of their defensible positions. The cavalry, which could bypass the Romans and launch an unexpected attack, played a crucial role in this. In this case, they could have acted in a similar way to the Gothic cavalry at the Battle of Hadrianopolis in 378.<sup>85</sup> The massing of the Gepid army and the cavalry charge could have broken the defences of the Roman army, and this could have led to the death of the Roman leader Calluc in battle. In the event that the Gepids had not surprised the Roman army with something unexpected, the Romans could have retreated in an organised manner to continue the fight elsewhere later. The defeat must have been decisive. According to Attila Kiss after the victory of the Gepids, there could not have remained a significant Roman military force in the Danube region.<sup>86</sup> According to the historian Procopius,<sup>87</sup> besides Sirmium, they then captured several cities of Dacia<sup>88</sup> and the Roman population was murdered and plundered.<sup>89</sup> The Gepid army used direct warfare against the Roman army throughout the campaign. They looked for the opportunity to engage in battle,

<sup>76</sup> JORDANES: 95 (262).

<sup>77</sup> Sirmium was a city in the Roman province of Pannonia, located on the Sava river, on the site of modern Sremska Mitrovica in the Vojvodina autonomous province of Serbia.

<sup>78</sup> Justinian I (Greek: Ἰουστινιανός) Eastern Roman/Byzantine emperor (r. 527–565).

<sup>79</sup> Theudebert I (533–548) was the Merovingian king of Austrasia.

<sup>80</sup> BÓNA et al. 1993: 28.

<sup>81</sup> Calluc (? – 539) was a *magister militum* of the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire.

<sup>82</sup> The *magister militum* was a top-level military command used in the late Roman Empire, dating from the reign of Constantine the Great.

<sup>83</sup> Marcellinus comes' date of birth is uncertain, died circa in 534. He was an Eastern-Roman/Byzantine historian.

<sup>84</sup> Marcellinus 1995: 48 (539). The exact location of the battle is unknown.

<sup>85</sup> MARCELLINUS 1993: 617 (XXXI. 11).

<sup>86</sup> KISS 2015: 124.

<sup>87</sup> Procopius (Greek: Προκόπιος) was a late antique Greek scholar and historian (circa 500 – circa 550).

<sup>88</sup> It is not clear whether the Gepids occupied Dacia Ripensis or part of Mediterranean, but according to Attila Kiss, it was the former. KISS 2015: 124.

<sup>89</sup> Procopius 1962: 439–441 (III.33.8).

where they inflicted a decisive defeat on the forces defending the area, making it possible to plunder and conquer Roman territory.

In 552, an armed conflict developed between the Gepids and the Langobards in the Carpathian Basin. King Audoin<sup>90</sup> was supported by Emperor Justinian I. The Byzantine emperor's aim was to use the military strength of the Langobards to defeat the Gepids and the Eastern Goths in the battlefield of Italy.<sup>91</sup> Roman/Byzantine troops were not directly involved in the campaign against the Gepids, but Germanic Thuringian<sup>92</sup> troops were with the Langobards. According to Paulus Diaconus,<sup>93</sup> the Gepids, led by Prince Turismod,<sup>94</sup> marched against the Langobard army.<sup>95</sup> Both sides used direct warfare, seeking to bring the war to a quick, unmediated conclusion. The course of the battle is not known, but according to a Langobard historian, both the Gepids and the Langobard fought well. The battle was ultimately decided by a fortuitous event according to Paulus Diaconus. Prince Alboin,<sup>96</sup> who led the Langobard army, and Prince Turismod met on the battlefield, and Alboin emerged victorious. With the death of the Gepid leader, his army was disbanded and fled the battlefield.<sup>97</sup> The battle between the two leaders raises the question of how much, if any, of the encounter between the two princes could have been intentional. According to Paulus Diaconus, it was accidental, Alboin had not planned such an action, but there were previous examples of the Gepids killing the leader of the opposing army in the cases of Ellac and Calluc. In this case, if this confrontation did indeed take place, it is possible that this was Prince Turismod's way of trying to decide the battle, but Alboin finally defeated him. According to Kiss, Paulus Diaconus put the clash of the two warlords in the story to emphasise Alboin's valour afterwards.<sup>98</sup>

After the Langobard victory, the Gepids were forced to make peace with Justinian I. After the death of the emperor, relations between the new ruler Justinian II and the Langobards deteriorated and the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire formed an alliance with the Gepids. The conflict between the two peoples was renewed in 567.<sup>99</sup> In the first battle, the army led by King Alboin was victorious over the Gepids. Then, thanks to Byzantine help, the Gepids gained the upper hand over their neighbour and defeated the Langobards in the second battle.<sup>100</sup> According to Paulus Diaconus, the Langobards, through Frankish mediation, allied themselves with the Bayan the khagan of the avars<sup>101</sup> to reverse the course of the war.<sup>102</sup> The allies attacked the

<sup>90</sup> Audoin (r. 547–560) was king of the Langobards.

<sup>91</sup> Kiss 2015: 145.

<sup>92</sup> Thuringians were a western Germanic people.

<sup>93</sup> Original name Paulus Warnefridus (725?–799?) Langobard monk and historian.

<sup>94</sup> His exact date of birth is not known, he was the son of the Gepid king, Turisind (546–560), and he was killed at the Battle of Asfeld in 552.

<sup>95</sup> The exact location of the battle is not known, but Paulus Diaconus refers to it as "Asfeld" ("Land of Aesirs").

<sup>96</sup> Alboin (r. 569–572) was king of the Langobards.

<sup>97</sup> Paulus Diaconus: 1901: 95–96 (I. 23).

<sup>98</sup> Kiss 2015: 151.

<sup>99</sup> BÓNA et al. 1993: 93.

<sup>100</sup> Theophylact Simocatta 1996: 7–12 (VI. 10).

<sup>101</sup> Bayan (r. 562–602) was the khagan of the Avar Khaganate.

<sup>102</sup> Paulus Diaconus 1901: 101 (I. 27).

Gepid kingdom simultaneously. According to the Langobard chronicler, the Gepid king Kunimund<sup>103</sup> wanted to fight the invaders separately and launched his army against Alboin first. Paulus Diaconus does not name the location of the battle where the two armies clashed, the battle eventually ending in the defeat of Gepids, with the victorious Langobards killing King Kunimund.<sup>104</sup>

Few written sources are available on the course of the war. There is not enough information about the course of the battles. According to the sources, both sides wanted to decide the course of the war by direct warfare and open battle. King Kunimund, although greatly outnumbered by the enemy, did not retreat to Sirmium and other fortified places, as the Langobards later did in Italy when the Franks attacked. The Gepid ruler could rely on his armed forces and possible Byzantine help. Kunimund, therefore, decided to settle with Alboin first. In the event of a victory over the Langobards, he could turn his full military force against the Avars. In the event of a possible Langobard defeat, Kagan Bayan might not have continued the campaign, but would have been inclined to reach a settlement and the Gepida kingdom might have been saved.

In summary, the Gepid military culture was primarily characterised by direct warfare. During their campaigns, they were able to deploy quickly, seeking the opportunity for open battle. Through these decisive confrontations, they sought to quickly destroy the enemy's military forces, bring the war to a close and achieve their political goals. According to the sources, the battles made good use of the terrain. The Gepids were well adapted, able to successfully confront other military cultures that differed from each other. They were able to win victories over the Roman/Byzantine, the Huns of Steppe and the Germanic Langobards, in several cases even managing to kill the enemy commander. In the war that led to their downfall, however, they failed to implement their war plans and were eventually defeated.

## Indirect methods in the Gepid military culture

According to the oft-repeated basic thesis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz,<sup>105</sup> "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."<sup>106</sup> For the Germanic peoples, this often meant the direct acquisition of booty or the coercion of others to pay taxes, because war was seen as a means of directly acquiring material wealth and resources. This is reported by Tacitus in his work *Germania*. The Roman historian reports that the important purpose of the campaigns launched by the Germanic tribes was to gain fame and fortune.<sup>107</sup> Indirectly, these raids to obtain booty also served political ends, because these material goods were often used by the leaders to achieve their own ambitions.

<sup>103</sup> Kunimund (r. 555–567) was king of the Gepids.

<sup>104</sup> Paulus Diaconus 1901: 101 (l. 27).

<sup>105</sup> Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) Prussian military theorist.

<sup>106</sup> CLAUSEWITZ 1976: 75.

<sup>107</sup> TACITUS 1961: 56 (14–15).

Violence aimed at the direct acquisition of material goods was as common among the Gepids as among other Germanic peoples. In the first third of the 6<sup>th</sup> century in 517, Marcellinus comes reported of a major cavalry raid in the Balkans. According to the Byzantine official's description, „Geta” cavalry appeared on the frontier of the peninsula, as in the chapter discussed earlier, invaded the Balkan territories of the empire and sacked and pillaged several provinces.<sup>108</sup> According to the Byzantine historian, the invaders penetrated deep into the empire, plundering and ravaging Macedonia,<sup>109</sup> Thessaly,<sup>110</sup> and advancing as far as Thermopylae<sup>111</sup> and Epirus Vetus.<sup>112</sup> The Gepids were able to gain much booty during this large-scale campaign because, according to Marcellinus comes, the emperor sent the praefectus of Illyricum, Johannes,<sup>113</sup> to the Germans as a ransom of a thousand pounds of gold to redeem the Roman prisoners.<sup>114</sup>

In 530 the Gepids again attacked the imperial provinces. In contrast to the previous attack, Mundo,<sup>115</sup> the military commander of Illyricum, tracked down the marauding Germans and defeated their army.<sup>116</sup>

The Germanic armies used the war not only to achieve their political goals, but also for the material gain from it. In contrast to the campaigns discussed in the previous chapter, the aim of the Gepids was not political, but directly profitable, so that the acquisition of booty was not the excuse for the war, but the aim itself. In these campaigns, the possibility of direct confrontation with the enemy was not sought. On contrary to direct warfare, the aim was not to destroy the enemy's military forces, but to conquer and plunder as much territory as possible in the shortest possible time, preferably unprotected. Moreover, in Halsall's view, the use of violence in this form could also be used to undermine the authority of the passive ruler of the territory, destroy his resources and create political unrest, as well as to increase confidence and faith in the potential of the attacking warlord.<sup>117</sup>

Fighting battles, therefore, in these campaigns was primarily about protecting the spoils and securing the return journey. A similar event took place in 571, when the Langobards attacked the Frankish territories after plundering Italy, according to Paulus Diaconus.<sup>118</sup> The Langobard princes' armies soon found themselves a new target after Italy, Gaul, ruled by the Franks. The first attack on Frankish territory came in 571.<sup>119</sup> Against the marauding Langobard troops, Frankish King Gutram<sup>120</sup> sent an

<sup>108</sup> Marcellinus 1995: 39 (517).

<sup>109</sup> Byzantine Macedonia had limited geographical connection to ancient Macedonia and was mainly located in what is now the modern region of Southern Thrace.

<sup>110</sup> Thessaly is in the centre of modern Greece, south of Macedonia and separated from Epirus by the Pindos Mountains.

<sup>111</sup> Thermopylae (”Hot Gates”) is a narrow pass and modern town in Lamia, Phthiotis, Greece. In Greek mythology the Hot Gates is one of the entrances to Hades.

<sup>112</sup> Marcellinus 1995: 39 (517).

<sup>113</sup> Johannes (?–?) *praefectus Illyrici*, Eastern Roman military commander of Illyricum.

<sup>114</sup> Marcellinus 1995: 39 (517).

<sup>115</sup> Mundo (Greek: Μοῦνδος; Moundos, Latin: Mundo) was an Eastern Roman/Byzantin general of Gepid, Hun and/or Gothic origins (?–536).

<sup>116</sup> MARCELLINUS 1995: 39 (517).

<sup>117</sup> HALSALL 2003: 140.

<sup>118</sup> Paulus Diaconus 1901: 127 (II. 32).

<sup>119</sup> BACHRACH 1972: 41.

<sup>120</sup> King Gutram (r. 561–592) was the Frankish king.

army of Burgundian soldiers led by Amatus patricius.<sup>121</sup> According to the Frankish historian Gregorius Turonensis and the Langobard historian Paulus Diaconus, in the battle between the two armies, the Langobards won a decisive victory, Amatus was killed in fight, and the invaders returned to Italy laden with booty.<sup>122</sup>

The aim of the Langobard and Gepid raids was therefore not territorial conquest but direct profit. In the first attack of the Gepids, the Byzantine forces were unable to prevent the plundering of the territory. The seriousness of the situation is also shown by the fact that the Gepids were able to take a large number of prisoners. The prisoners probably slowed the Germans down and also had to be guarded, but despite this the imperial troops were helpless. In the previous years, there had been serious internal crises and rebellions in the empire and the Gepids took advantage of this favourable situation.<sup>123</sup> The campaign of the year 530 was not as successful, however, because the imperial commander Mundo had defeated the Gepids and probably recovered most of the booty.<sup>124</sup>

The Gepid kingdom in the 550's not only exerted pressure on the Eastern Roman/ Byzantine Empire through direct warfare, but also through indirect means. In 551, according to Procopius, the Gepids released Slavic marauders into the imperial territories at the Sirmium crossing. The Slavic warriors, according to the Byzantine historian, were transported across the Danube, for which they were charged a gold piece each. Iustinian I, according to Procopius, was unable to prevent the Slavs' depredations and raids.<sup>125</sup>

This action by the Gepids probably served a dual purpose. The first may have been for direct material gain. This was provided by the large quantities of gold collected from the Slavs. This provided the Gepids with a secure income, while the Slavs had to bear the risk and possible losses of the campaign. This was on condition that the Gepids had to be able to control Slavs passing through their territory with their permission so that they would not attack Gepid territories. In addition to the financial gain, there was also a political gain from the operation. After the victory of the Gepids in 539, Iustinian I stopped paying annuities to the Gepids. The Slavic invasion was not repulsed by the empire and, according to Procopius, it prompted the emperor to seek an accommodation with the Gepids.<sup>126</sup>

In summary, the Gepid military culture, in addition to direct warfare, also used indirect means to achieve its goals. These could be independent ideas, such as the direct plundering of a territory and the consequent material gain. In these cases, there is no political intent, but the opportunity is also used to obtain loot. Indirect methods were not only used for material gain but also for political pressure. In 551, such methods were used to encourage the emperor towards a political settlement.

<sup>121</sup> Amatus was a patrician of Gallo-Roman origin, a Frankish general.

<sup>122</sup> Tours-i Gergely 2010: 305–306 (IV. 42); Paulus Diaconus 1901: 131 (III. 3).

<sup>123</sup> Kiss 2015: 117.

<sup>124</sup> Kiss 2015: 121.

<sup>125</sup> Procopius 1962: 317 (VIII.25.7–11).

<sup>126</sup> Procopius 1962: 317 (VIII.25.7–11).

## Conclusion

The Gepid kingdom was located at the junction of the Steppe military culture, the Eastern Roman/Byzantine Empire and the Germanic host territories. Throughout its history it fought many wars successfully. The Gepid army was able to fight against neighbours of different military cultures. The army of the Gepid kingdom was very similar to the armies of other Germanic peoples. These included professional fighters serving in retinues, but also the bulk of the army was made up of temporary soldiers with military experience.

As with other Germanic peoples, the Gepids had both infantry and cavalry. The development of cavalry was strongly influenced by the military cultures of the neighbouring Sarmatian and Hun Steppes, but it also retained elements of its Germanic characteristics. The Gepids, like the Goths, saw the emergence of armoured heavy cavalry fighting in the Steppe style. In addition, the use of mounted archers in the Gepida army is assumed. The infantry was structured in a similar way to other Germanic peoples. This meant, for the most part, infantrymen fighting in a closed order whose equipment was typical of Germanic military culture. These warriors engaged the enemy using a shield wall.

In their wars, they used mainly direct warfare. In these campaigns, they sought to destroy the enemies in a decisive battle, to conquer their territory and to achieve their political goals. In cases where the main objective was to obtain booty, they did not seek open battles, but attacked defenceless areas in the hope of gaining material gain. Indirect methods were also used in these campaigns, but the primary objective was the direct acquisition of booty and only secondarily the achievement of political goals. The Gepid kingdom, therefore, possessed a powerful army, which contributed much to their military and political success.

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