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Stéphane Gal, ed., *Des chevaliers dans la montagne. Corps en armes et corps en marche 1515-2019*. Grenoble: UGA Éditions, 2021. 218 pp. €22.00. (pb). ISBN 9-78-2377472901; €11.99. (eb). ISBN: 9782377473281.

Review by Emanuele Sica, Royal Military College of Canada.

The *War of the League of Cambrai* (1508-1516), one of the many conflicts collectively known as the *Italian Wars* (1494-1559), was fought as a proxy war between the French Valois and the Spanish and Holy Roman Empire Habsburg dynasties. Leaving no stones unturned, both emerging superpowers shrewdly exploited ancestral rivalries between Italian powers such as the Duchy of Milan, Venice, and the papacy, to carve out their own territorial ambitions.

Among the many engagements between armies, the Battle of Marignano on 13-14 September 1515 fought near the city of Milan, merits some attention. Pitting the French army, led by its king, Francis I, against the soldiers of the Old Swiss Confederacy, allied with the Habsburgs and the papacy, it saw the triumphal victory of French forces against outnumbered and outgunned Swiss mercenaries, thus definitely sealing the territorial ambitions of the Swiss cantons in the Italian peninsula.

Des chevaliers dans la montagne however is not so much interested in the battle itself as it is in its prelude, namely the journey across the Alps by the 40,000 soldiers and knights, along with their retinues, artillery guns, and train of supply wagons from the French territory to the Lombardy plains. In fact, the book stems from a research project, MarchAlp (Marche armée dans les Alpes), that aimed to recreate the living conditions of a Renaissance army marching through mountainous terrain. Funded by the LabEx (Laboratoires d'Excellence) ITEM (Innovations en territoire de montagne), l'Université Grenoble-Alpes, and private funding from an Australian patron, with the partnership of two departments, villages bordering the Franco-Italian border, and even an Alpine regiment of the French army, fifty persons embarked on a two-day experimental expedition (think of a reenactment, but on scientific grounds) on 6-7 July 2019 of a march through the Col de Mary in the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence department. This experiment aimed to analyze the performance of the human body under duress in an early modern military campaign and its physiological challenges.

The book is divided in two parts, with a third and concluding part providing an iconographic appendix: The first part, written by Stéphane Gal, sets the strategic context of the battle of Marignano by concisely describing the various actors involved in the battle, with an understandable special focus on the French army, its main assets (heavy cavalry and artillery) along with its allies, the Landsknechts. What is more relevant to the experiment though is the analysis based on contemporary sources of the French marching order and the logistical

nightmare of providing the basic needs for 40,000 soldiers (and likely several thousand civilians, most of them women and children, who had the habit of following armies in early modern times). If a system of *Étapes* (garrison station) helped resupply the advancing army in French territory, soldiers had to bring their rations for three days while crossing the Alps. From a strategic point of view, marching one's army through goat trails that, most of the time, could be navigated only by trudging in single column, overextending the army in a ninety-kilometer line while never losing its battle coherence, was an important, yet overlooked feat of the Battle of Marignano. Gal's explanation based on primary and secondary sources is both convincing and fleshes out the reenactment.

The second half of the book, "Par monts et labos," is the heart of the project. By being provided tailor-made armor and weapons crafted from specialized blacksmiths, each of the fifty participants (among them the professional historian Stéphane Gal) experimented with the impact of equipment on marching soldiers. The chapter "Comprendre l'histoire par le corps et la montagne" reveals the daily challenges of moving in full-plated or hard-boiled leather armour whose main purpose of protecting the body sensibly decreased mobility and provided an unwelcome strain on aching joints enduring the upward hike to the mountain pass. The mountainous trek proved even more challenging for the few "knights" who, in one instance, even fell tumbling on the trail, stressing, if need be, that mountains were no terrain to fight in early modern times.

The book is indeed fascinating and makes for a compelling read, eschewing jargon to reach for a wider audience. Unfortunately, its very interdisciplinary nature is also its liability. While the last chapters relating the lab tests dealing with cinematics, biomechanics, and physiology provide interesting points, the sheer amount of data and technicalities proved too much for this reader and could prove challenging for others. Moreover, I feel that it is risky to draw definitive conclusions from this experiment, given its small scope both in the number of participants and in the number of days. Recreating similar conditions as those found in 1515 proved quite challenging, if not impossible. For instance, the trail used by Francis I's army is now a paved road, and contemporary human bodies have different physiological traits and pathogens than those of five centuries ago. That is not to say that the book is not a worthy read, but I am uncertain if it will manage to interest the general public outside of a few experts in the field.

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