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## WRITING ABOUT WAR IN BYZANTIUM

Military literature is one of the fields in which cultural continuity between the Graeco-Roman world and Byzantium is more apparent. Indeed, an uninterrupted thread connects Aeneas the Tactician (ca. 350 BC), Asklepiodotus (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), Onasander (middle of 1<sup>st</sup> century AD), Aelianus (end of 1<sup>st</sup> century - beginning of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), Arrian (85-175 AD) and Polyaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD)<sup>(1)</sup> to the numerous Byzantine strategists writing from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Such continuity marks a contrast between Byzantium and the medieval West, which did not produce any treatises on the strategic, tactical and operational aspects of warfare from the time of Vegetius's *Epitoma* (written between 385 and 450) down to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Giraud de Barri's *Expugnatio hibernica* offered some timid suggestions on tactics<sup>\*1 (2)</sup>. Considering that most ancient military literature was written in Greek, one might deduce that the lack of a similar production in the medieval Occident was the result of the virtual disappearance of Greek as a spoken language in western society

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<sup>(1)</sup> For a survey of the military literature of the Graeco-Roman world, see the important article by A. Dain, J. A. de Foucault, "Les stratégistes byzantins", *Travaux et Mémoires*, vol. 2, 1967, pp. 317-90 (esp. pp. 319-336); and L. Loreto, "Il generale e la Biblioteca. La trattatistica militare greca da Democrito di Abdera ad Alessio I Comneno", in *Lo spazio letterario della Grecia antica, II, La ricezione e l'attualizzazione del testo*, Roma, 1995, pp. 563-589.

<sup>(2)</sup> See Ph. Contamine, *La guerre au Moyen Age*, Paris, 1980 (quoted here from the Italian translation of the book: *La guerra nel medioevo*, Bologna, 1986, p. 292).

from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, such a conclusion would be wrong. Indeed, military texts in Latin, although less common, were also produced in Antiquity. Among them, it is worth mentioning Frontinus, Vegetius and the anonymous *De rebus bellicis*. But even the transmission of those authors disappears during the early and high Middle Ages<sup>(3)</sup>. In order to explain this considerable difference between Byzantium and the medieval West, we cannot even invoke reasons related to a higher degree of military conflict in the former in comparison with the latter. According to this point of view, as a matter of fact, it would be very risky to claim that in the Middle Ages people fought more in the eastern than in the western part of Europe. Therefore, the striking difference in the ways in which ancient military literature was transmitted in Byzantium and in the medieval West must have depended on cultural and social motivations rather than on strictly military ones. But before we try to elucidate such motivations a brief survey of Byzantine military literature is necessary.

Apart from excerpts, adaptations and texts on poliorcetics<sup>(4)</sup>, we know of about fourteen Byzantine writings that address issues of strategy, tactics, generalship and military organisation, also providing indications on how to deal with foreign nations. On the whole, they are set in two different periods: from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> and from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>(5)</sup>.

<sup>(3)</sup> It seems that Vegetius was familiar to Rabanus Maurus (see P. Riché, *Écoles et enseignement dans le Haute Moyen Age. Fin du V<sup>e</sup> siècle - milieu du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 1989, p. 302), who suggested his work to Lothar I. In any case, the first translation of the *Épitome* dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century (see n. 48).

<sup>(4)</sup> On this see Dain, de Foucault, *Les stratégestes byzantins* (see η. 1), pp. 336-340, 347-353, 358-368. In the field of poliorcetics particularly important are two texts attributed to an anonymous writer whose pseudonym was Heron of Byzantium: D. F. Sullivan, *Siegecraft. Two tenth-century instructional manuals by "Heron of Byzantium"*, Washington D. C, 2000 (Dumbarton Oaks Studies, XXXVI).

<sup>(5)</sup> General surveys of Byzantine military literature are: Dain, de Foucault, *Les stratégestes byzantins* (see η. 1), esp. pp. 336-375; H. Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, II, Wien, 1978, pp. 341-340 ("Kriegswissenschaft"); V. Kucma, "Militärische Traktate", in *Quellen zur Geschichte des frühen Byzanz (4.-9. Jahrhundert). Bestand und Probleme*, hrsg. von F. Winkelmann u. W. Brandes, Amsterdam, 1990, pp. 327-335; Ph. Rane, "Battle", in *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare, II, Rome from the Late Republic to the Late Empire*, eds.

Our literature begins with the works of a certain Urbicius, who can perhaps be identified with the homonymous *praepositus sacri cubiculi* living at the court of Emperor Anastasius (491-518)<sup>(6)</sup>. He wrote two texts: the first is a very brief *Tacticon*, devoted to Emperor Anastasius, which summarises in eleven chapters the first part of Arrian's *Ars Tactica*<sup>(7)</sup>; the second, the *Epitedeuma* ("invention"), proposes a new device for protecting infantry, which the author calls *canones cathêlômenoi* (literally "nailed poles" or "poles with nails"). Alphonse Dain took these to mean a sort of "barrière de chevaux de frise"<sup>(8)</sup>, whereas the new editors of the text are uncertain whether these poles were to be set up vertically or horizontally<sup>(9)</sup>.

The most famous Byzantine treatise on military art, the *Strategicon*, was composed between 592 and 610<sup>(10)</sup>. Its authorship has been questioned and variously attributed by scholars to Emperor Maurice (Scheffer, Aussaresses, Mihăescu), Urbicius *magister militum* (Vàri, Dain, Grosse) and Philippicus, brother-in-law of Emperor Maurice (Wiita)<sup>(11)</sup>. Unfortunately, the internal evidence of the work does not allow us to

Ph. Sabin, H. Van Wees, M. Whitby, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 343-348 (survey of the production of Late Antiquity and Early Byzantium); E. McGeer, "Military Texts", in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Studies* edited by E. Jeffreys, with J. Haldon and R. Cormack, Oxford, 2008, pp. 908-915.

<sup>(6)</sup> See G. G. Greatrex, H. Elton, R. Burgess, "Urbicius' Epitedeuma: An Edition, Translation and Commentary", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, vol. 98, 2005, pp. 35-74 (on the author, see pp. 40-42; on the text, see pp. 54-58).

<sup>(7)</sup> Editions: R. Förster, Kaiser "Hadrian und die Taktik des Urbicius", *Hermes*, vol. 12, 1877, pp. 449-471 (text, pp. 467-471); A. Dain, *Histoire du text d'Elie le Tacticien*, Paris, 1946, pp. 37-39 (text).

<sup>(8)</sup> See Dain, de Foucault, *Les stratèges byzantins* (see n. 1), p. 341.

<sup>(9)</sup> Greatrex, Elton, Burgess, Urbicius' *Epitedeuma* (see n. 6), pp. 50-51.

<sup>(10)</sup> *Das Strategikon des Maurikios*. Einführung, Edition und Indices von G. T. Dennis, Übersetzung von E. Gamillscheg, Wien, 1981 (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, XVII). I have not yet seen the book by Ph. Raneë, *The Roman Art of War in Late Antiquity: The Strategicon of the Emperor Maurice. A Translation with Commentary and Textual Studies*, Aldershot, 2008 (Birmingham Byzantine and Ottoman Monographs), which has been announced.

<sup>(11)</sup> Literature about this discussion is summarised in S. Cosentino, "Per una nuova edizione dei *Naumachica* ambrosiani. Il *De fluminibus traiciendis* (Strat. XII B, 21)", *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi*, s. 2a 3, 2001, pp. 63-107 (esp. pp. 65-66).

make a definitive attribution, apart from the conclusion that its author was undoubtedly a skilled general in the battlefield. However, considering some important details - such as, for instance, the circumstance that cod. *Ambrosianus* 119 b sup., one of the best Byzantine sources of military texts<sup>(12)</sup>, attributes it to Emperor Maurice - the hypothesis that the treatise was effectively written by Maurice remains, in my opinion, the best one. The *Strategicon* is divided into eleven books dealing with all aspects of war (strategy, cavalry, military organisation and training, infantry, stratagems, baggage train, generalship, tactics and how to deal with foreign enemies). Some time after the conclusion of Book 11, the same author added to it three other sections (indications on battle array = St. XII A; mixed formation of cavalry and infantry = St. XII B; and how to build a military camp = St. XII C), which have been edited as the 12<sup>th</sup> book of the *Strategicon* together with a short composition about hunting by an unknown author (= St. XII D).

At a date not easy to determine, perhaps toward the end of the second half of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, an anonymous officer composed a short treatise, which is known in the historiography under the title of *De militari scientia*<sup>(13)</sup>. Most of its materials are drawn from the *Strategicon*, not with the aim of summarising it, but rather of adapting it to the time in which the anonymous author lived. As a matter of fact, cavalry is the focus of the analysis, and only a few references are made to infantry. The language of the work is full of vernacular locutions with no precedents in other Byzantine writings. In the last two decades, the consensus among scholars is that the figure of the mysterious Syrianus *magistros* (mentioned only in two texts dating back to the late 10<sup>th</sup> or early 11<sup>th</sup> century) is the author of another *Strategicon*, which originally consisted

(12) See B. Leoni, *La Parafrasi Ambrosiana dello Strategicon di Maurizio. L'arte della guerra a Bisanzio*, Milano, 2003 (Bibliotheca Erudita, Studi e documenti di Storia e Filologia, 22), who gives the whole transcription of the version of Maurice's text handed down by the *Codex Ambrosianus*.

(13) Edited by K. K. Müller, "Ein griechisches Fragment über Kriegswesen", in *Festschrift für Ludwig Urlichs*, Würzburg, 1880, pp. 106-138; see also the unpublished dissertation by P. Bertazzoli, *Il De militari scientia. Introduzione, testo, traduzione e commento storico*, presented to the University of Bologna in the academic year of 2005-2006.

of three works preserved separately in the manuscript tradition<sup>(14)</sup>. If we accept the existence of such an extensive military compendium, as it has been called by C. Zuckerman, its early form was composed as follows: the first part (corresponding to the present *De re strategica*<sup>(15)</sup>) was devoted to politics, strategy, defence and fortifications, infantry, cavalry, military encampment, tactics, ambushes, and intelligence; the second part (corresponding to the present *Naumachiai*, the sole work expressly attributed to Syrianus by the manuscript tradition<sup>(16)</sup>) dealt with naval combat, focusing on preparations, signals and tactics; the third part (corresponding to the present *Rhetorica militarist*), included different kinds of rhetorical speeches, which, according to different situations, had to be addressed to soldiers by a general. As far as its date is concerned, based on the available evidence it is only possible to say that Syrianus's *Strategicon* was written in a period stretching from the second

(14) See C. Zuckerman, "The military compendium of Syrianus magister", *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen Byzantinistik*, vol. 40, 1990, pp. 209-224; S. Cosentino, "The Syrianos's 'Strategikon': a 9<sup>th</sup> century source?", *Bizantinistica. Rivista di Studi Bizantini e Slavi*, s. 2a, voi. 2, 2000, pp. 243-280; Ph. Rance, "The date of the military compendium of Syrianus magister (Formerly the sixth-century anonymus Byzantinus)", *Byzantinische Zeitschrift*, vol. 100/2, 2007, pp. 701-737.

(15) See the edition of *De re strategica* by G. T. Dennis, in *Idem, Three Byzantine Military Treatises. Text, Translation, and Notes*, Washington D. C., 1985 (Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae, XXV), pp. 10-135.

(16) Editions by A. Dain, *Naumachica*, Paris, 1943, pp. 43-55; and E. Jeffreys in J. H. Pryor and E. M. Jeffreys with an Appendix by A. Shboul, *The Age of the Drōmōn. The Byzantine Navy ca. 500-1204*, Leiden-Boston, 2006 (The Medieval Mediterranean, Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 62), pp. 456-481.

(17) The only available text is the old edition by A. Köchly, *Anonymi Byzantini Rhetorica militaris*, Turici, 1855 (Index lectionum in Literarum universitate Turicensi inde a die XV. mensis Octobris MDCCCLV usque ad diem XXII. mensis Martii MDCCCLVI habendarum), pp. 3-18. On rhetorical speeches in the Byzantine military tradition see A. M. Taragna, "Logos e Polemos: eloquenza e persuasione nei trattati bizantini di arte militare in Atti del VI Congresso Nazionale dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Bizantini", published as a special issue of *Siculorum Gymnasium*, n. s., vol. 57, 2004, pp. 797-810. See also E. McGeer, "Two military orations of Constantine VII", in *Byzantine Authors: Literary Activity and Preoccupations. Texts and Translations Dedicated to the Memory of Nicolas Oikonomides*, ed. by J. Nesbitt, Leiden, 2003, pp. 111-135.

half of the 6<sup>th</sup> to the first half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though recent research seems to point to the 9<sup>th</sup> century<sup>(18)</sup>.

Among the numerous works written by Emperor Leo the Wise (889-912), there are also two texts of military argument: the so-called *Problemata* and the *Tactica*. The first<sup>(19)</sup> <sup>20</sup> is a very strange composition based on a "question and answer" format in which Leo formulates questions on particular situations of warfare and replies by quoting passages from Maurice's *Strategicon*. Even the *Tactica*<sup>(20)</sup> which are structured in their last version in 20 books or *constitutiones*, make extensive use of Maurice's work, but they rewrite also parts of the *Strategikos* by Onasander and the *Tactica theoria* by Aelianus. However, it would be too simplistic to see in Leo's *Tactica* a pure compilation, devoid of any originality. The structure of the work is arranged according to the personal criteria of the emperor (preface, tactical principles, generalship, division and organisation of army, military decision-making, armament, training of cavalry and infantry, punishments, baggage train, encampment, preparations for battle, how to act during and after it, incursions, how to fight with foreign nations, naval combat, and military sayings), which are different from those of his sources. With regard to the degree of originality of Leo's *Tactica*, the insertion of the XIX *constitutio* (naval war) is particularly meaningful because no other ancient or Byzantine author before him had ever written on such a topic, with the sole exceptions of Varro, Vegetius and Syrianus. Leo's son, Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus (913-959) - another learned emperor - also paid some attention to military literature. Among the numerous works he wrote or commissioned on the history of the empire, it worth mentioning a short text that he himself

<sup>(18)</sup> See the recent discussion by Raneë, *The date of the military compendium* (see n. 14).

<sup>(19)</sup> Edition by A. Dain, *Leonis VI Sapientis Problemata*, Paris, 1935.

<sup>(20)</sup> The only complete edition of the *Tactica* remains that printed in the *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 107, cc. 669-1120, which follows the eighteenth-century edition by J. Lami (which, in its turn, is based on that published by J. Meursius in 1612). The work of R. Vári, *Leonis imperatoris tactica*, I-II, Budapest, 1917-1922 (Sylloge Tacticorum Graecorum, III) unfortunately ends in chap. 38 of the XIV *constitutio*. Dennis had begun working on a new edition of the *Tactica*, McGeer, *Military Texts* (see n. 5), quotes it as a forthcoming edition; therefore, it is possible that Dennis's work is going to be published in the future.

composed concerning what an emperor has to do in view of a military expedition<sup>(21)</sup>.

A third *basileus* of the 10<sup>th</sup> century participated directly in the boom of writings on warfare which is typical of this period: Nicephorus Phocas (963-967). But differently from his predecessors, he himself was a brilliant general, who had a series of important successes in the fight against the Muslims before ascending to the throne. His military experience is in some way reflected in three works, which were written or possibly inspired by him: the so-called *Praecepta militaria*, the *De velitatione bellica* (*Peri paradromēs*) and the *De re militari*. The first is a sort of synthesis of the military principles followed by the author; in the parts which have been transmitted to us, infantry, cuirassed cavalry and its battle array, encampment, scouts and spies are analysed<sup>(22)</sup>. The *Peri paradromēs* ("Skirmishing" or "Guerrilla", as it has been translated), more than a treatise on modern bush fighting, is a presentation on how to combat avoiding picked battles, fighting with a well-trained and organised army<sup>(23)</sup>. In turn, *De re militari* is a treatise devoted to the tactical and organisational aspects of an army (encampment, sentinels, marches, ambushes, arming, scouts, intelligence, supply system, defence of

<sup>(21)</sup>Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *Three Treatises on Imperial Military Expeditions*, Introduction, Edition, Translation and Commentary by J. Haldon, Wien, 1990 (*Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, XXVIII), Text C, pp. 94-151.

<sup>(22)</sup> Edited by E. McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century*, Washington D. C., 1995 (*Dumbarton Oaks Studies*, XXXIII), pp. 12-59 (text).

<sup>(23)</sup>There are two modern editions of this work, which were published at about the same time: that by G. T. Dennis in *Idem*, *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (see n. 15), pp. 132-239; and G. Dagron and H. Mihâescu, *Le Traité sur la guérilla (De Velitatione) de l'empereur Nicéphore Phocas (963-969)*, Texte établi par G. Dagron et H. Mihâescu, traduction et commentaire par G. Dagron, Paris, 1986 (text: pp. 28-135). Whereas Dennis tends to ascribe the treatise to Leo Phocas (Nicephorus' brother), Dagron and Mihâescu believe it to be the work of Nicephorus. On the kind of war described in the treatise see the long article by G. Breccia, "Grandi imperi e piccole guerre. Roma, Bisanzio e la guerriglia"

(I) , *Medioevo Greco. Rivista di storia e di filologia bizantina*, vol. 7, 2007, pp. 13-68;

(II) *Medioevo Greco*, vol. 8, 2008, pp. 49-131.



cities, parades, etc.) on a theatre of war resembling that of the Bulgarian mountains<sup>(24)</sup>.

The last important text of Byzantine military literature is the *Tactica* by Nicephoros Ouranos<sup>(25)</sup>, who had an important career in the army between 979 and 1011. In 996/ 997, he reached the rank of Domestic of the Schools of the West; in 999, he was promoted to Domestic of the Schools of the East, assuming then the post of governor of northern Syria between 999-1011<sup>(26)</sup>. It was probably during this last period that he wrote his *Tactica*. Contrary to what one might expect, it is not a treatise on the tactical, organisational and operational aspects of the army of his period, but rather an overall compilation of military writings from the past. As in Leo's *Tactica*, the sources utilised by Nicephorus Ouranos are old, but the way they are arranged is quite new. The result is a work (partially unedited until now) embracing all aspects of warfare, from army to navy, from training to stratagems, from encampment to intelligence.

After this necessarily cursory digression on Byzantine military writings, we can turn our attention to the question posed above: why does the military literature of Antiquity continue in Byzantium and not in the medieval West? In order to answer this question one may note, first of all, that the idea of war pervading the Hellenistic and Roman

<sup>(24)</sup> Edition by G. T. Dennis in *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (see n. 15), pp. 246-327. Dennis, as J. Kulakovskij at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, is inclined to identify the emperor mentioned in the treatise with Basil II (see pp. 242-243), thus implicitly rejecting Nicephorus Phocas's authorship.

<sup>(25)</sup> No complete edition of Nicephorus Ouranos's *Tactica* exists. A detailed analysis of it can be found in A. Dain, *La "Tactique" de Nicéphore Ouranos*, Paris, 1937, esp. pp. 19-37 (content of its chapters). The edition of chaps. 56-65 has been made by McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth* (see n. 22), pp. 88-163 (infantry, cavalry, siege warfare); that of chaps. 63-74 by J.-A. de Foucault, "Douze chapitres inédits de la Tactique de Nicéphore Ouranos", *Travaux et Mémoire*, vol. 5, 1973, pp. 281-312; that of chaps. 119-123 (naval war) by Dain, *Naumachica* (see n. 16) and by Pryor and Jeffreys, *The Age of the Drōmōn* (see n. 16), pp. 571-605.

<sup>(26)</sup> On the career and work of Nicephorus Ouranos see E. McGeer, "Tradition and Reality in the Taktika of Nikephoros Ouranos", *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 45, 1991, pp. 129-140; F. Trombley, "The Taktika of Nikephoros Ouranos and Military Encyclopaedism", in *Pre-Modern Encyclopaedic Texts*, edited by P. Binkley, Leiden-New York-Köln, 1997, pp. 261-274.

treatises is very similar to the one we find in the Byzantine texts. I do not refer to the moral or religious implications of waging war, such as its necessity for mankind or the existence of a *bellum iustum*, but rather to the operational features of military activity. The continuity is perceivable not at the level of "why war" but of "how to wage war". With regard to the latter, it is interesting to read two passages from Maurice's *Strategikon*, probably the most influential text of the whole body of Byzantine military literature:

Οὐκ ἔστιν ὀλκάδα πελάγει διαπορθμεύεσθαι κυβερνήτου χωρίς, οὐκ ἔστι πολεμίους καταγωνίζεσθαι τάξεως καὶ στρατηγίας εκτός, δι' ἧς οὐ μόνον του ἰσορροπουντος πλήθους των πολεμιῶν περιγίνεσθαι δυνατὸν ἔστι συν Θεῷ, ἀλλὰ καὶ του πολλῶ πλέον εν αριθμῷ ὑπερβάλλοντος. οὐδέ γάρ, ως τινες των ἀπειρων εχουσι, διὰ θράσους καὶ πλήθους ἀνδρῶν οἱ πόλεμοι κρίνονται, ἀλλὰ δι' εὐμενείας Θεοῦ, τάξεως τε καὶ στρατηγίας, ἧς ἐπιμελητέον μάλλον ἢ συλλογῆς πλήθους ἀκαίρου. ἡ μὲν γάρ ἀσφάλειαν καὶ ωφέλειαν ἀγει τοις ταῦτη καλῶς κεχρημένοις, ἡ δε συντριβὴν καὶ ἐπιζήμιον δαπάνην (St. VII 1,1-13).

"A ship cannot cross the sea without a helmsman, nor can one defeat an enemy without tactics and strategy. With these and the aid of God it is possible to overcome not only an enemy force of equal strength but even one greatly superior in numbers. For it is not true, as some inexperienced people believe, that wars are decided by courage and numbers of troops, but, along with God's favour, by tactics and generalship, and our concern should be with these rather than wasting our time in mobilizing large numbers of men. The former provide security and advantage to men who know how to use them well, whereas the other brings trouble and financial ruin" (trans. by Dennis<sup>(27)</sup>).

And again, at the closing of the same paragraph:

Κυνηγίῳ δε εοικε τα των πολέμων, ὡσπερ γάρ ἐκεῖ διὰ τε κατασκόπων καὶ δικτύων καὶ ἐγκρυσμάτων καὶ παρασκόπων καὶ κατακυκλώσεων καὶ τοιούτων σοφισμάτων μάλλον ἡ δυνάμει ἡ Θῆρα τούτων περιγίνεται,

<sup>(27)</sup> Maurice's *Strategikon*. *Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, translated by G. T. Dennis, Philadelphia 1984, p. 64.

ούτως δει καί επί των πολέμων ἀρομόζεσθαι, είτε προς πλείους, είτε προς ολίγους γίνονται, το γάρ φανερώς καί χειροί δί' οὐσεως μόνον βιάζεσθαι τους εναντίους, οτι καί δόξη τις νικάν τούτους, μετά κινδύνου καί ζημίας ού τῆς τυχούσης ἢ του πράγματος ἀπόβασις αὐτῶ συμβαίνει, οπερ των αλογίστων ἐστίν ἀνάγκης μεγίστης χωρίς μετά ζημίας νίκηην κτασθαι, κενήν ὑπόληψιν φέρουσαν (St. VII 1, 45-53).

"Warfare is like hunting. Wild animals are taken by scouting, by nets, by lying in wait, by stalking, by circling around, and by other such stratagems rather than by sheer force. In waging war we should proceed in the same way, whether the enemy be many or few. To try simply to overpower the enemy in the open, hand to hand and face to face, even though you might appear to win, is an enterprise which is very risky and can result in serious harm. Apart from extreme emergency, it is ridiculous to try to gain a victory which is so costly and brings only empty glory" (trans. by Dennis<sup>(28)</sup>).

The quoted passages reveal the same attitude of prudence towards war that we can find in Onasander's *Strategikos*. Combat is not an act of bravery or physical strength, but rather an exercise of understanding, planning and training. These principles feature in the whole production of Byzantine military writings from the early period up to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, pervading the mentality of both soldiers and civilians<sup>(29)</sup>. Princess Anna Comnena, daughter of Alexius I, gives a definition of military value (*iandreia*) according to which victory is a consequence of prudence (*euboulia*) more than bellicosity (*to thumoides tes psychēs*)<sup>m</sup>; bravery without circumspection may be dangerous for a good leader and it may turn out to be a risk instead of a brave deed. Strength and courage are

<sup>m</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

<sup>(29)</sup> See the observations by W. E. Kaegi, *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy*, Brookline Mass., 1983 (The Hellenic Studies Lecture), pp. 1-17, and G. Breccia, "Con assennato coraggio...". L'arte della guerra a Bisanzio tra Oriente e Occidente", *Medioevo Greco. Rivista di storia e filologia bizantina*, vol. 1, 2001, pp. 53-78.

<sup>(30)</sup> Anna Comn. *Alex. XV* 2, 9-12 Leib: "εγώ μεν ουν ἀνδρείαν οἶμαι, ὅταν τις ουν εὐβουλία τῆς νίκης κρατήσῃε· το γαρ θυμοειδές τῆς ψυχῆς καί δραστήριον ἀνευ του φρονειν κατηγορούμενον γίνεται καί θράσος ἐστίν ἀντί θάρσους".

not negative characteristics in themselves for a soldier. Maurice, in the 11<sup>th</sup> book of his *Strategicon*, devoted to the military customs of foreign nations, recognises that the warriors of the *xantha ethnē* (the light-haired peoples, that is to say, the Franks, the Lombards and other Germanic speaking tribes) "are bold and undaunted in battle" (Strat. XI 3, 1). But for him, simply, boldness and force are only parts of a vast and highly structured complex of rules forming military thought. Here we are approaching one of the most important characteristics which explain the continuity of the *materia bellica* from the Roman times to Byzantium: the factor of complexity in the sphere of warfare.

Both Graeco-Roman and Byzantine treatises show that units, corps, armaments and armours are extremely differentiated. Leading an army entails, for a good general, the ability to use with competence cavalry like infantry, archery like other forms of artillery, regular soldiers like barbaric allies. Training an army implies the application of several technical specialisations. Moving an army into different theatres of war, which are often very distant from one another, means that an efficient supply system has to be organised<sup>(31)</sup>. In short, waging war in Byzantium is something very complicated due to the articulation that the whole process of training, moving and supplying a high number of soldiers demands. Can we say the same thing for the medieval West, at least for the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> or the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries? I leave the answer to the specialists, but it seems to me that if in the medieval Occident warfare can still be considered a complex activity, the difference in comparison with the East is the scale of such complexity, which is consistently lesser in the former than in the latter. From this derives one of the reasons that led *homo Byzantinus* to write about war: the need of preserving and transmitting a series of notions which are too numerous and detailed to be handed down from generation to generation under oral and customary forms.

<sup>(31)</sup>J. Haldon, "The organisation and support of an expeditionary force: Manpower and logistics in the Middle Byzantine period", in *To empolemo Byzantio (9<sup>os</sup>-12<sup>os</sup> ai.) / Byzantium at War (9<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> c.)*, Athena, 1997 (Ethniko Idryma Ereunon. Institouto Byzantinon Ereunon, Diethne Symposia, 4), pp. 281-312; *Idem*, "Feeding the army: food and transport in Byzantium, ca. 600-1100", in *Feast, Fast or Famine: Food and Drink in Byzantium*, edited by W. Mayer and S. Trzcionka, Brisbane, 2005, pp. 85-100 (Byzantina Australiensia 15).

Almost every Byzantine treatise, whether written by actual soldiers or by "stratèges en chambre" (A. Dain<sup>(32)</sup>), does not fail to stress the importance of the tactical disposition of the troops to win a battle. Tactics is no less important than training. Since early Christianity some authors, like Tertullianus, had used military language in a metaphorical sense for defining the fight of the new faith against paganisms<sup>(33)</sup> <sup>34</sup>. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the emphasis of Byzantine political ideology on the notion that there was a close correspondence between the celestial hierarchies and those existing on earth contributed to a renewed use of military language in social contexts. In such contexts, the term *taxis* (lit. "array battle" or "military order") is used in Constantine Porphyrogenitus's *De cerimoniis* to indicate the right order of society, in contrast to anarchy or social disorder, the *ataxia*<sup>m</sup>. In other words, ruling his subjects, for an emperor, can be the same as leading an army for a general: the former, as a representative of God on earth, leads to the victory of Christianity over the other religions; the latter, as a representative of the emperor on the battlefield, leads his army to victory over the enemies of the empire. By reading the chapters devoted to the qualities of a good general in Maurice's *Strategicon* or in Leo's *Tactica*, one realises that the behaviour a general is supposed to show towards his soldiers (self-control, liberality, courage, cleverness, affection)<sup>(35)</sup> is not too much different from that of the emperor towards his subjects. Thus, some salient notions characterising military literature in Byzantium, such as those of leadership, order and hierarchy, find close correspondence with widespread values in Byzantine society. The same meaning of strategy, in the wider sense of how to find the best ways for living, seems to be echoed in the narrative of the *Strategicon* by Cecaumenos<sup>(36)</sup>, written in the second half of the

(32) Dain, de Foucault, *Les stratèges byzantins* (see n. 1), p. 343.

(33) See M. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch. Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago-London, 2001, pp. 112-117.

(34) See Const. Porph. *De cerim.* proem. I, pp. 2,19-21 Vogt.

(35) On the features of a good general in the military literature of Antiquity and Byzantium see the articles written by I. Antonopoulou, "Les manuels militaires byzantins: la version byzantine d'un 'chef romain'", *Byzantiaka*, vol. 14, 1994, pp. 97-104, and by B. Campbell, "Teach yourself how to be a general", *Journal of the Roman Studies*, vol. 77, 1987, pp. 13-29.

06) There are three modern editions of this work: B. Wassiliewsky, V. fernstedt, *Cecaumeni "strategicon" et incerti scriptoris "de officiis regiis libellus"*, Petropoli,

11<sup>th</sup> century. Noting that the contents of this work have nothing to do with a military treatise as such, several scholars (Wassiliewsky, Lemerle, Beck, Litavrin, Spadaro<sup>(37)</sup>) have questioned the authenticity of this title. But in light of what is said above, it does not appear impossible that Cecaumenos may have chosen to use a military metaphor to suggest the best way for an individual to be successful by using cleverness, prudence and respect for the established hierarchy. Therefore, military thought is in accord with more general features of Byzantine society and this may explain why, at least to some extent, in the eastern Roman empire people wrote about warfare and in the medieval Occident not.

Did Byzantine production of military texts serve an actual military functionality? At first sight, such an issue might seem paradoxical. However, considering that at least half of the extant treatises were written by men who never saw a battlefield, one is led to raise this question. Whereas texts written by military men are usually deemed to reflect real fighting practices (Maurice's *Strategicon*, *De militari scientia*, *De velitatione*, *De re militari*, *Praecepta militaria*), those written by civilians are mostly interpreted as works of antiquarianism or erudition (Urbicius, Syrianus, Leo VI, the *Sylloge Tacticorum* and, though he was not a civilian, Nicephoros Ouranos). According to this interpretation, the former would have a practical purpose, the latter a cultural one<sup>(38)</sup>. With regard to this problem, we may notice that evidence does not allow us to draw a rigid line between the two typologies. All treatises are characterised by a high degree of interplay between past and present, action and reflection, practice and theory. Texts collecting former works do not only reshape their sources according to the taste of their authors (*Sylloge Tacticorum*, Nicephorus Ouranos), but they often bear the signs of the time in which they were written (Syrianus, Leo VI). At the same time, all treatises coming from the pen of officials mention books written by "ancient

1896; G. G. Litavrin, *Sovety i rasskazy Kekaumena. Socinenie vizantijskogo polkovodka XI veka*, Moskva, 1972; and Cecaumeno, *Raccomandazioni e consigli di un galantuomo (Stratēgikon)*, Testo critico, traduzione e note a cura di M. D. Spadaro, Alessandria, 1998 (*Hellenica*, 2).

<sup>(37)</sup> Cecaumeno, *Raccomandazioni*, ed. Spadaro (see n. 36), pp. 14-15.

<sup>(38)</sup> Dagron, *Le traité sur la guérilla* (see n. 23), pp. 139-141; Trombley, *The Taktika of Nikephoros Ouranos* (see n. 26), p. 205; McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon's Teeth* (see n. 22), p. 171; McGeer, *Military Texts* (see n. 5), pp. 907, 912.

authorities" (*hoi palaioi*)<sup>m</sup>. Therefore, despite their different approaches, both sets seem to have the same aim, which is that of transmitting a whole *corpus* of notions about war. For both, the narrative starting point is the complexity of warfare. In order to deal with this crucial aspect of everyday life, emperors and generals needed to know not only how to do it, but also what their predecessors had done. According to the Byzantine mindset, waging war is not a natural and instinctive behaviour of human beings. War is a μέγα κακόν (-) καὶ πέρα κακῶν<sup>(40)</sup> ("a great evil and the worst of all evils") for society, a battle of the devil against mankind<sup>(41)</sup>. And just as by praying and practicing *askêsis* a monk is able to succeed against the devil, so by learning and training a soldier is able to succeed against the enemy. Since warfare is deeply inscribed in the course of history, the present learns from the past to shine light on the future. Moreover, in order to unsettle the opposition between "practical" and "theoretical" military treatises<sup>(42)</sup>, one should bear in mind that military technology did not change drastically between Antiquity and Byzantium. Of course, some important transformations did happen during Late Antiquity, such as the end of the Roman *legio*, the prevalence of cavalry over infantry, or the growing importance of archery in armies. However, revolutionary innovations were very few, with the exception of the

<sup>(39)</sup>For instance: *Strat. proem.* 18 Dennis (one part of the work is based on the ancient authorities and another on the experience of the same author); II 6, 3 (reference to *hoi palaioi*, "the ancient authorities"); *Praec. milit.* I 4, 33; I 5, 41 McGeer (reference to "the ancient authorities"); I 7, 66, 70 (reference to the Macedonian phalanx and Alexander the Great). *De re mil.* 28, 1-12 Dennis (the ancient authorities have passed on the need of training and organising the army); other references to *hoi palaioi*: 1, 26; 2, 8; 15, 3; 16, 15; 27, 9-10. *De velit.* 10, 90-91 Dennis (historical books and experience of predecessors as sources of learning); 17,132-135 (reference to predecessors' experience of war as source of the treatise); 20,12-13 (quotation from Leo's *Tactica*); 21,14-15 (mention of "those who wrote books on tactics and strategy" in the past).

<sup>(40)</sup>*De re strat.* 4, 9 ed. Dennis.

<sup>(41)</sup>Leon. *Tact.* in PG 107, c. 673C.

<sup>(42)</sup> In any case, military theoretical analysis found a practical application during battles in Byzantium: C. M. Mazzucchi, "Le katagraphai dello *Strategikon* di Maurizio e lo schieramento di battaglia dell'esercito romano nel VI-VII secolo", *Aevum*, voi. 55,1981, pp. 111-138; T. Koliass, "He polemikê taktikê tōn Byzantinōn: theōria kai praxē", in *To empolemo Byzantio* (see η. 31), pp. 153-164; G. Dennis *The Byzantines in battle, ibidem*, pp. 165-178.

introduction of the stirrups and of the invention of Greek fire. Such slow evolution of tactics, armour and armament, not to mention military engineering, may have made the continued use of ancient treatises less anachronistic in Byzantium than it is usually thought.

On the other hand, that writing of military treatises paralleled the transformation of Byzantine society is shown by the time in which their production came to an end. This time is set approximately around the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Even though, in the first half of the thirteenth century, Nicephorus Blemmydes did still insert a brief *tacticon*<sup>m</sup> in his *Basilikos Andrias* ("Imperial Statue"), we may state that the production of texts devoted to warfare ceased in Byzantium at the end of the Macedonian dynasty. It is difficult not to surmise that there must be a correlation between the two circumstances, although it is not easy to identify the exact correlation. But it is possible, at least, to point out two relevant phenomena in the period after Alexius I Comnenus ascended to the throne (1081-1118):(1) a territorial reduction of the scale of the operational context of the Byzantine army; (2) a change in the structure of said army. As far as the first is concerned, the occupation of about two-thirds of Anatolia by the Seljuks and the loss of southern Italy led to, among other things, a simplification of the problems of the transportation of supplies for the Byzantine troops. As to the structure of the army, major transformations involved the collapse of the theme system and an increasing presence of mercenary troops and contingents of allies close to the Constantinople elite regiments<sup>(44)</sup>. From the point of view of tactics, this phenomenon entailed a more difficult coordination among units in the battlefield, for every large nucleus of the army had a different level of training and fighting capacity. In addition, the power of the emperor over the army also began to weaken from the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the increasing influence of the aristocracy over Byzantine society as a whole. Therefore, important parts of the

<sup>(43)</sup> Edited by H. Hunger, I. Sevckenko, *Des Nikephoros Blemmydes "Basilikos Andrias" und dessen Metaphrase von Georgios Galesiotes und Georgios Oinaiotes. Ein weiterer Beitrag zum Verständnis der byzantinischen Schrift-Koine*, Wien, 1986 (Wiener Byzantinische Studien, XVIII), chaps. 123-155 (military role of the emperor and his expertise in both land and naval matters), pp. 82-96.

<sup>(44)</sup> See J. W. Birkenmeier, *The Development of the Komnenian Army: 1018-1180*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 2002 (History of Warfare, 3), pp. 139-163.



armed forces were under the personal control of aristocratic leaders whose lack of allegiance to the *basileus* could very well bring about crucial defeats for the imperial army. This situation happened, for instance, in the course of the Battle of Manzikert (1071), when the treacherous behaviour of Andronicus Ducas, son of the Caesar John, caused the rout of the Byzantine army and the capture of Romanus IV by the Turks<sup>(45)</sup>; or, again, one may think of the disaster of Myriokephalon, when Baldwin's Antiochene allies seem to have fought poorly<sup>(46)</sup><sup>47</sup>.

At the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the hierarchical structure of Byzantine society was undergoing deep transformations. And the army, as a mirror of the society of the time, was similarly affected by disarticulation and uncertain leadership. The decreasing number of effectives, the simplification of tactics and the lack of military training led to a loss of complexity and sophistication in Byzantine warfare. This might be one of the keys for explaining why the production of military literature in the empire came to an end at about this period. In addition, we should also keep in mind the weakening of the grasp of the imperial power over society. Indeed, the imperial institution, as the source of both social rule and military leadership, had been the mainspring of the production of writings on warfare in the preceding centuries. It is also possible that the reinforcement of the aristocracy in Byzantium in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries caused a slow modification of the characteristics of military leadership. One can see this transformation more as a result of the breakdown of social discipline and solidarity between the emperor and his subordinates than as a consequence of the introduction of the western aristocratic ideals of courage and prowess into the Byzantine military *ethos*, as argued by A. Kazhdan. It is not by chance, perhaps, that when Blemmydas wrote his mirror for the prince - which included, as already said, a brief *tacticon* - supporting the political ambitions of the young John II Lascaris of Nicaea over the other Byzantine potentates, Vincent of Beauvais included in his *Speculum maius* large parts of Vegetius's *Epitoma*<sup>m</sup>. These events were the reflection of different sides of the same coin. In thirteenth-century Byzantium, warfare would continue

<sup>(45)</sup>J.-C. Cheynet, "Manzikert: un désastre militaire?", *Byzantion*, vol. 50, 1980, pp. 410-438.

<sup>(46)</sup>Birkenmeier, *The Development of the Komnenian Army* (see n. 44), p. 131.

<sup>(47)</sup>Contamine, *La guerra nel medioevo* (see n. 2), p. 289.

to be an enduring phenomenon, but with two striking differences with respect to previous centuries: (1) it was experienced on a more reduced scale of intensity and with smaller numbers of soldiers; (2) it took place in a society sharply divided into territorial dominions with increasing influence over the central power. On the contrary, in the medieval West the building of national states would lead to the enlargement, sophistication and complexification of the structure of the armies. For kings and military leaders, this entailed the necessity of dealing with a state of warfare marked by a much higher degree of complexity than in the past. Thus in the Occident, war would become something that had not only to be "done", but also to be "thought" and "planned" on a much larger scale than in the early and high Middle Ages. Complexity brought in its wake the need to think about tactics, strategy and organisation. War became an object of study, and to acquire knowledge of the rules it was again necessary to have books and treatises. Whereas in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century western Europe, the Graeco-Roman military tradition could actually engage in dialogue with the present, giving rise to a revival of interest in it<sup>(48)</sup>, in Komnenian and Palaeologan Byzantium it became something extraneous to the society and thus did not continue to be imitated and transmitted.

<sup>(48)</sup>On the western revival of the Roman tradition of military literature in the 14<sup>th</sup> and especially in the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Vegetius and Frontinus), see Contamine, *La guerra nel medioevo* (see n. 2), pp. 289-300; P. Richardot, *Végèce et la culture militaire au Moyen Age (V, XV siècles)*, Paris, 1998; *Vegécio, Compêndio da Arte Militar*, Tradução de J. Gouveia Monteiro e J. E. Braga, Estudo Introdutório, Comentários e Notas de J. Gouveia Monteiro, Prefácio de M. H. da Rocha Pereira, Coimbra, 2009, pp. 120-147.