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Byzantine art of war in the tenth century in theory and in practice

Theses of the dissertation

Explanation to choose this topic of the dissertation

The study of the Byzantine art of war does not belong to one of the favourite topics of the domestic historical research. Although the topic of the martial arts in the medieval ages is more well known Byzantium is rarely focused on. In this way the situation is similar to the western historiography – the subject of medieval warfare is discussed in big literature but mainly from the crusader wars, Byzantines get into the picture from then on. In the antecedents the wars of Justinianus are mentioned, after Maurikios and Herakleios few processions can be found. The renewing of the art of war in the X. century was given lower attention, although the tactics of Leo the Wise is often mentioned. As for the domestic matters few people deal with this field, so it can not be claimed that the martial arts of the successor of Rome would be widely known not even inside historical circles. I am neither a philologist myself nor a martial historian, so I would and could not have written this dissertation if western interest in the Byzantine warfare had not been raised in the past two three decades. Processions and text editions made by that – written mainly in English – have made it possible for me to venture this field and start my own studies. And so the military discourses, which provided the spine of my dissertation (*De velitatione*, *Praecepta militaria*, *De re militari*), were used in greek-english edition. The knowledge of these publications is inevitable in the understanding of the military thinking of Byzantium of the tenth century and so it seems, this group of source has not been really used domestically. That is why the introduction of the contemporary Byzantine martial arts can be useful to the ones who are experimenting in Hungary. It can be worth finding out about the tactical theories and martial manoeuvres of the contemporaries of our ancestors even for the experts of the Hungarian history of that period.

Better knowing of Byzantine martial arts can also be useful because new discourses in the X century were written and published in the military elite of the empire enabling us to have a sight in the strategical-tactical thinking in such a depth, that is unknown in Europe of that period. So not only do we try to look for the theoretical basics from the data of the records, but we are able to find out about the practical realisation of the theoretical discourses by using them. Rules made and set up by soldiers make it possible for us to get to know the war methods of that time. The theoretical well-foundedness of the Byzantine art of war is a non direct proof of the reality of the the medieval art of war. No study on art of war or similar to that was written in Western Europe at that time and for a while on and there was not antique heritage of that size available, although they were making efforts to give the appropriate answers to the newer challenges. The development of the Byzantine art of war in the X century is a product of 'challenge-answer' evolution, the study of which can be a lesson to the ones interested in the topic, which I would like to introduce in the dissertation.

The sources and the grade of procession of the literature of the topic

As it was mentioned earlier, to write my dissertation it was essential to know the discourses

of Byzantine war affairs, which were published in English and Greek. *De velitatione*, *De re militari* and finally the *Tactics of Leo the Wise* were published and released by G. T. Dennis. *Praecepta militaria* (and its rewritten version by Nikephoros Ouranos) as well as the publication of the emperor texts of law of the military properties were the work of E. McGeer. Military records found in *De cerimoniis* were translated by J. Haldon (the account of the parts of making war of the emperor, and the expeditions to Longobardia). The edition of *Parangelmata poliorketika* and *De obsidione toleranda* are the works of D. Sullivan.

Concerning the narrative sources they could rely on contemporary Byzantine authors, mainly on Leo the deacon, who as a witness of the rule of II Nikephoros and I Ioannes, gave detailed descriptions of their invasions. The continuation of Theophanes lasts only until 960, nevertheless it can be a useful source. The chronicle of Skylitzes is already not a contemporary one, however it discusses this period in details, the works of Psellos are not detailed well enough from the point of military history, yet they contain important pieces of data (rather *Historia syntomos* than *Chronographia*). Fortunately besides Byzantine sources authors of other nations also left important pieces of work telling about that period. Probably one of the best chronicles is the work of Yahya b. Said a Christian Arabic historian, but Muslim chroniclers report in details about that period as well. I studied the work of Miskawayh in the most detailed way, but the collections of sources (only until 959) published by Vasiliev are also very useful and the work of Mihály Kmoskó written about the Muslim geographical writers in Hungarian might also be a great help. Among the Armenians, the contemporary writer called Asolik is a source of help and is also Aristakes, following him, Matthew of Edessa who rather deals with the period of the crusades, however several important parts can be found till the rule of II Basileios at the beginning of his work. The work of Barhebraeus the Syrian historian from East is also a useful piece of source containing a lot of information about the events of that time. The time of the soldier emperors is less frequently studied in the western sources, however the writings of Liudprand help us see events from an important point of view of a witness. The chronicles of Widukind and Thietmar were occasionally used as sources, however only to draw a parallel with the contemporary Saxon practice.

The literature I used is also mainly based on the English works, besides the above mentioned researchers J. D. Howard-Johnston M. Whittow and A. Toynbee gave me a great deal of help. The monography of H-J. Kühn (to the military organization) written and published in German and the discourses of W. Seibt helped me with the understanding of the period, however, to be able to understand the regional series of events the concerning volumes of the *Tabula Imperii Byzantini* were also very helpful. It is relatively rather to find a source concerning the minor war subject, individual studies, articles (by Howard-Johnston, Dagron) may help the interested. The regular order of war and tactics is a more focused area (McGeer, Haldon), I could primarily rely on and use the ascertainments of these works. For the questions of siege technics and castle protection I benefitted from the escorting studies of the concerning discourses (by Sullivan, McGeer). Unfortunately there was no writing or source about the different branches – though some mention (Dawson is rather documentary-like) – the subject of armature is observed by more (mainly by Kolias and Haldon often brings the topic up).

The body of the dissertation

In the first big section of my dissertation Byzantine ways of recruitment and questions of supply are discussed. The differences between the *themas* and *tagmas*, ways to secure equipment and armour, feeding and payment are also mentioned here. The topic of real warfare itself is divided into four main parts, on the basis of the characteristic forms of warring forms: first minor war methods are demonstrated, where based on the *De*

velitatione, the Taktika of Leo the Wise and the advice of Kekaumenos were a way of source (so were for the rest of the parts). Warring tactics, described in these sources, characterised the Byzantine warfare until the X century. Then the realisation of practical instructions were demonstrated through examples taken mainly from Eastern battles.

The next section follows the organization of the army and the tactics of the battles with the help of Praecepta militaria. Questions of training and principle were also brought up here, however unlike in the battles, instructions of the discourses are much more difficult with the records of chronicles. Regular tactics of the Byzantine groups – developed by the middle of the X century especially to defeat the similar arabian infantry-cavalry combined armies – transforming into regular army can be observed in this section. Following this, application of warfare regulations in several face to face battles are demonstrated in details. The way to carry out expeditions gives topic to the next section. Embodiment of the army, securing its march, the order of setting up camps are the most important questions, not military actions, rather activities taking to the battlefield. These are mainly demonstrated through the De re military, however by using the basic directions of the Praecepta militaria. Practical examples, showing the problems occurring during contemporary expeditions, presented the texts of handbooks.

Finally, the demonstration of siege tactics and castle defending close the topic of martial arts, also presented with the help of contemporary discourses. I mainly relied on texts from Parangelmata poliorketika and the Tactics of Nikephoros Uranos in the antecedent, while in the latter I used De obsidione tolerandae. Based on these Byzantine art of warfare in the X century can be well characterized compared with the change of tactics of the armies: in the beginning dominated by indirect raiding actions, but as time went on more direct actions appeared. Luckily this period is filled with sieges, enabling it for me to show regulatoin through several examples.

The results of the study

In my dissertation I studied the transformation of Byzantine war affairs in the X century. I demonstrated the Byzantine regulation of army and important military discourses of that time. Through military actions in the chapters I could illustrate the practical realisation of these, thus it can be taken proved that regulations were in deed in use and led to their success. To summarize things it can be said that the Byzantine army went through the following path: from a defending uprising militia fighting in the style of remote tribes they turned into a professional war machine with the force to carry out expanding expeditions. Reorganization is also reflected in the contemporary military writings, demonstrating the tactical possibilities of the different groups. Defensive military actions of mobile light troops based the bottom of the Byzantine tactics, characteristical fighting tactics of that kind formed the dominating tradition of martial arts. Then, however, when the political unity of the Arabian caliphate – the greatest threat of that time - fell apart in the first part of the X century, the strategical situation of the empire changed. They gained relative dominance over their declining rivals (arabs and bulgarians) through their sources available. Byzantium gradually started greater military actions in the East compared with the earlier borderline raids. As a result of this it became necessary to work out a new kind of tactics: Earlier close-range light cavalry attacks dominated, later, however, these attacks were followed by thoroughful military actions of footmen-horsemen troops in the depth of enemy areas, during which open fights and sieges of castles occurred. Mastering the new tactics was a gradual course, reaching its final form due to the activity of Nikephoros Phokas by the 960s. His reforms defined the Byzantine regulation of army and the face of tactics of the discussed period. Military success, however, caused political crisis as well, giving direction to the rule of II Basileios: oppression of the influence of the military

aristocratical families, total control of the army by the emperor, focusing to the new battlefield in the Balkan territories instead of the Eastern expeditions, were all answers to the practice of the previous decades (at the same time the strategical situation also changed: Fatimid caliphate appeared on the scene, while during the leadership of Samuel a new state reborned – Byzantium had not been able to afford a dual front war earlier either, logistical problems coming from its grown size now also dictated to avoid one).

So the X century was the period of the shaping and forming of the Byzantine martial arts: accustomed to the challenges dictated by the changed strategical situation, military regulation, warfare and tactics were also transformed. During this development writings of their own significant warfare literature was used so were the examples of their enemies' practice. In the end a regular-like army was formed, which relied on the cooperation of the properly developed arms lead by qualified leaders, who gained the respect and trust of their troops. This was the key to the Byzantine victories of that period securing the power of the empire in the eyes of their possible enemies.

As a closing, let here be the main principles of the military thinking of the Byzantines – these remained unchanged despite the start of the invasions.

- Regular trainings of the troops, their developing outside the period of expeditions is inevitable to the success and so is their catering.
- Before military operations the most possible information must be collected about the enemy and work out applicable procedure based on it – however during the invasion continuous surveillance on the quality and quantity of enemy troops and their movements is needed (adaptability and flexibility is important)
- Fights, however, must be avoided, it is wiser to rout the power and the moral of the enemy slowly rather than risking your armed forces in a battle.
- If fight should be unavoidable, first military tackles, raids are needed to undermine the moral of the enemy, only then on a carefully chosen place in a situation favouring the own troops applying the right tactics can a fight be taken place.
- Warring is risky business, that is why it is advisable to avoid it – if it is not possible allies must be found in order to split the power of the enemy, or sow dissension in the leadership of the enemy – which require diplomatical skills.

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