

GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS, *The Art of War in Byzantium (Past Imperfect)*. Leeds: Arc Humanities Press 2024. 134 pp. – ISBN 978-1-80270-100-5

• SAVVAS KYRIAKIDIS, Senior High School of Iasmos, Rhodope (savkyr76@gmail.com)

This monograph provides an overview of various aspects of Byzantine warfare. It discusses Byzantine military literature, strategic thought, battle tactics, and military equipment. It is mostly a synopsis of the current state of scholarship and focuses on the findings of the most recent research.

The book's introductory section specifies its aims and justifies its thematic and chronological limits. THEOTOKIS does not discuss military developments in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. Transformations in warfare throughout Europe and the Middle East and developments in the geopolitical position of the Byzantine empire would require separate treatment. Similarly, length limitations prevented THEOTOKIS from discussing siegecraft. (Nevertheless, he provides a comprehensive bibliography on late Roman and Byzantine siege warfare.) It is also worth noting that the author acknowledges the value of HALDON's and TREADGOLD's works in the study of Byzantine military history, even though both monographs have been written over twenty-five years ago.¹

Chapter One examines questions regarding the authorship, aims, and audience of military treatises. THEOTOKIS includes in his analysis works from the Hellenistic and Roman periods, since they influenced the Byzantine *Strategika* and *Taktika*. Discussing the social background of authors of military works, THEOTOKIS concludes that most of them were highly educated, possessed military experience, and drew information from oral and written tradition that survived to their day. Nevertheless, there were notable exceptions like Aelian and Vegetius, who probably had no military experience (pp. 3–4). Many military manuals were accepted as works of entertainment rather than as military instructions, while others were addressed to both civilian and military men (pp. 4–6). Nevertheless, as THEOTOKIS points out, these works were extremely useful depositories of military knowledge. To reinforce his argument, he mentions well-known and characteristic examples which indicate that the military elite and emperors benefited

1. JOHN HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204*. London 1999; WARREN TREADGOLD, *Byzantium and its Army, 284–1081*. Stanford 1995.

from the study of military manuals. They were part of the military training and education of high-ranking officers and future emperors (pp. 6–7). Another aspect of military literature which THEOTOKIS mentions is that many of these works were propaganda pieces, the aim of which was to exalt the military profile of rulers or to raise their patrons' prospects of promotion. Moreover, the author observes that most military treatises were compiled in periods of intense military activity, when the empire carried out aggressive expansionist policies or struggled to defend its borders (pp. 7–8). Chapter One concludes with a brief but comprehensive survey of military treatises starting with the fifth-century handbook entitled *Epitideuma* of Urbicius and ending with *On Military Deployment* of the eleventh-century scholar Michael Psellos and the fourteenth-century treatise on the art of war, leadership and governance written by Theodore Palaiologos (pp. 9–23). THEOTOKIS briefly discusses the aims of each work and provides information about the context of their production and authorship. He adds some interesting comments. For instance, he inclines toward the view that the author of the *Strategikon of Maurice* was Phlippicus, dates it between 603–610, and adds that linguistic and stylistic choices confirm the author's claim that his was a non-literary practical manual for army officers (p. 10). In another example, THEOTOKIS relates that the *Sylloge Tacticorum* was compiled during the reign of Romanos I, and the addition to the title of the work of the phrase 'from the *Taktika* of Leo' can be seen as a *damnatio memoriae* by Romanos I's disgruntled son-in-law and future emperor Constantine VII (p. 16).

Chapter Two surveys the military strategies adopted by Byzantine emperors. After quoting the definition of strategy and tactics provided by *The Taktika of Leo VI*, THEOTOKIS observes that it was rather rare to find a clear-cut differentiation between tactics and strategy in the pre-modern world and adds that the first Byzantine authors to make the distinction between the two were Maurice and Syrianus (pp. 25–28). The discussion on strategy is divided into two sections. The first explains factors that affected Byzantine strategic thinking; the second deals with the question whether there was a Byzantine grand strategy. The author correctly stresses that Byzantine military thinking is affected by the concept that battles should be avoided unless they were necessary or the odds were overwhelmingly favourable to the empire. THEOTOKIS provides examples confirming that the military elite avoided pitched battles and that authors of military manuals, as well as historians, recommend the use of deception and trickery (pp. 28–31). Strategy was affected by the position of the empire in the wider geo-

strategic context of the Balkans, Italy, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. Byzantine rulers were oftentimes forced to fight on many fronts while they handled limited resources in money and manpower. It is interesting that the author argues that the availability of resources, ideological concepts of war against Muslim states, and the proximity to Constantinople rendered Anatolia strategically more important than the western parts of the empire (p. 33). Moreover, THEOTOKIS and MEŠKO have demonstrated that under the Komnenoi the western parts of the empire became strategically more important and Alexios I Komnenos (1081–1118) prioritised the defence of the Balkans over Asia Minor.² THEOTOKIS argues that the main aims of diplomacy were to delay responses to military aggression, as well as carefully survey and respond fast to political changes in the power structures of the empire's neighbours. He concludes that this use of diplomacy together with socio-economic factors, mostly the financial cost of war, led Byzantine rulers to avoid military conflicts (pp. 34–36). The last factor which according to the author affected Byzantine strategy was the idea of defending the Roman *ecumene*. This could be used as a justification for launching aggressive wars. Nonetheless, this ideology did not preclude Byzantine emperors from adopting a realistic and moderate policy: Basil I, for example, was reluctant to intervene in Italy without German and Papal consent (pp. 38–39).

The second part of Chapter Two (pp. 41–49) focuses on the question whether there was a Byzantine Grand Strategy. It discusses LUTTWAK's work and the reasons why his arguments have come under scrutiny (pp. 42–43).³ THEOTOKIS correctly points out that most scholars argue that Roman and Byzantine emperors formulated their military policies on an *ad hoc* basis and refers to HALDON's conclusion that strategic reaction to geopolitical events was a sort of crisis management.⁴ Moreover, given that Byzantine rulers often had limited knowledge of international developments and had to deal with *faits accomplis*, it is anachronistic to ascribe to them a concept of grand strategy as we would understand it in the twenty-first century (p. 43). These general conclusions are followed by a chronological survey, which draws on the most recent research and on statements found in mil-

2. GEORGIOS THEOTOKIS, *The Norman Campaigns in the Balkans 1081–1118*. Woodbridge 2014; MAREK MEŠKO, *Alexios Komnenos in the Balkans, 1081–1095*. London 2023.

3. EDWARD N. LUTTWAK, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*. Cambridge MA 2009.

4. HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society*, p. 43.

itary manuals, outlining the various strategies adopted by Byzantine emperors to respond effectively to continuous changes in the broader political and military environment (pp. 43–49).

Chapter Three deals with military organization and battlefield tactics. Description of specific battles makes the reading of this chapter engaging and provides a better understanding of the author's conclusions. The battle of Strasbourg (357) is a good example of the effectiveness of the combined use of cavalry and infantry (pp. 52–56). The battles of Dara (530) and Solachon (586) illustrate cavalry tactics and the importance of competent leaders who were able to adapt to changing circumstances and use the topography of the region to their advantage (pp. 56–62). The discussion of the battles of Taginae (552), Casilinum (554), and Dorystolon (971) examines how the Byzantines responded to enemies of diverse background. The most interesting part of this section of the book is that the author provides an account of the transformation of the Byzantine army from the sixth through the tenth centuries. He follows the conclusions of the most recent research regarding the role and evolution of the *themata* and points out the importance of military leadership (pp. 63–74). The battle of Arkadiopolis (970) is described as an indication of the high degree of discipline, professionalism, and training, as well as the competent military leadership of the Byzantine armies in the tenth century (pp. 74–76). By contrast, the battle of Manzikert (1071), which was fought roughly a century after that of Arkadiopolis, demonstrates the low morale and lack of training of the army at that time (pp. 76–79). Unlike other battles discussed by THEOTOKIS, Myriokephalon (1176) has received limited attention in modern scholarship, so the author's conclusions regarding the strategic and tactical errors of the Byzantines that led to their defeat at the hands of the Seljuks contribute to a better understanding of this battle. THEOTOKIS argues that emperor Manuel I made the mistake not to follow an alternative route, since the Byzantine scouts had spotted Turkish skirmishers, and the emperor failed to follow the prescriptions of military manuals. The Byzantine army did not take precautionary measures of battle order, and the troops lacked co-ordination, proper communication, and effective leadership (pp. 83–84).

Chapter Four discusses the technology of weapons and armour. THEOTOKIS examines how the use of arms was regulated by Byzantine law: for instance, Novel 85 of Justinian prohibited citizens from bearing weapons (pp. 85–86). The discussion of the efforts of the state to limit the widespread use of arms is followed by a brief examination of supplying weapons to the army and the role of *fabricae*, *apotheke*, and the *kommerkiarioi* (pp. 86–88). In

the second section of this chapter the author discusses the weaponry used by the Byzantine armies. He distinguishes hand-to-hand weapons, distance weapons, and defensive equipment. This discussion is supported by various illustrations such as illuminated manuscripts, religious iconography, and archaeological finds, which help the reader get a better insight into Byzantine weapons. In the hand-to-hand weapons the author includes swords, spears, lances, maces, axes, and wooden clubs (pp. 89–95). In the category of distance weapons, he includes bows used both by cavalry and infantry, the lasso, and javelins (pp. 95–99). The discussion of the defensive equipment focuses on the various types of armour used by Byzantine cavalry and infantrymen, on the types of shields, and the typology of helmets (pp. 99–111). THEOTOKIS surveys the evolution of military equipment from late Antiquity until the twelfth century, often giving details on size or useful references to cultural history. For instance, he argues that while archers made up a substantial part of the Byzantine army, the bow was rarely depicted as a weapon of military saints in the Middle Byzantine period due to artistic preference for the classical lance and because of Biblical allusions to the bow and arrow as a weapon of the devil (p. 96).

In sum, this short monograph is a valuable overview of the latest research on Byzantine warfare from the later Roman period until the twelfth century. It provides useful bibliography and follows the conclusions of the most recent research. It is a very good source of information for students of Byzantine and medieval military history and a helpful introduction for scholars and members of the general public with limited previous knowledge of Byzantine military history.

Keywords

Byzantine military history; Byzantine warfare