STRATEGIKON BY MAURITIUS: EASTERN MILITARY PHILOSOPHY IN EUROPE?

István FÁBIÁN, Assistant Professor Ph.D,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: *This paper aims to present a few aspects concerning the doctrinal base of the reforms in the Byzantine military in the 6th century: The Strategikon by emperor Mauricius. Situated at the crossroads of civilisations the Byzantine army employed a large variety of infantry and cavalry troops. During Mauricius's reign, the cavalry has undergone several structural changes which enabled to become one of the best striking forces in the early medieval times. Combining striking power and speed the Byzantine cavalry assured the supremacy of the empire up to the 11th century. Mauricius used with great ability, a combination of his battlefield experience combined and knowledge of ancient military sources like Vegetius and (probably) Sun-Tzu.*

Keywords: *Byzantine Empire, Mauricius, Cavalry, Reforms, Strategy*

Situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the Byzantine Empire presented from the military point of view such a level of organization of its art of war which enabled to withstand the waves of Persian, Avar, Slav and Arabic assaults for more than 500 years, between the 6th and 11th centuries.[1] The key of the success was not only the genius of the generals but, also the reforms made by emperor Mauricius (582-602) codified in his work "Strategikon". The historical circumstances of the elaboration of this work were unusually complex.

Mauricus "inherited a badly depleted treasury and three major wars.(In East, in the Balkans and in Africa-n.n.) The Avar and Slav advance became so alarming that he had to send some troops back to the Balkans; but he left Italy an Africa to defend themselves against the Lombards and Moors under military governors called exarhs. Money ran low, and in 599 Maurice ordered his troops to accept issues of arms instead of their army allowances. But at this the eastern armies mutinied; they only returned to allegiance when they were paid as usual the next year."[2] After stabilizing the situation in the conflicts with the Persians, the emperor sends his troops to the Danube and, in 599, when the area was cleared of barbarians he ordered that the army should stay during the

[1] Charles E. Petersen, *The Strategikon. A forgotten military classic,* Military Review, August, 1992, p.70 (*Strategikon...* in the following)

[2] Warren Treatgold, *Byzantium and its Army, 284-1081,* Stanford University Press, California, 1995, p. 19

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

winter in the areas North of Danube in order to reduce spending.(The order was canceled after the troops threatened with mutiny).
The situation remained stable for only three years, because in 602 "Maurice tried again to save on rations by ordering the soldiers to winter north on the Danube. This time they not only mutinied but marched on Constantinople, where they killed the parsimonious emperor and replaced him with the junior officer Phocas."[3]
Stingy or not the emperor proved to be an excellent writer: A versatile soldier and excellent commander, he used his theoretical and practical knowledge to conceive what J.C. Fuller considered to be "one of the best manuals about the science of war up to the 19th century".[4] The emperor himself called his work "a modest manual for those who want to consecrate themselves to army leadership"[5]. From a technical point of view the "Strategikon" is divided in 12 chapters (named by the author "books") having as topic the organization, training and logistics of the cavalry. To mention the fact, that the paternity of the work was questioned at a certain moment in the favor of the emperor's brother in law, the general Phillipicus.[6] Beyond this aspect it can be seen that the author is a well trained officer, who could explain in an accessible style and with great ability the innovations and experience of the most versatile part of the byzantine army: cavalry.
Unlike the "classical" Roman army, the Byzantines put a great accent on their cavalry which had a much greater mobility in the conflicts on multiple fronts. Reorganized by Mauricius himself, the basic tactical unit of the Byzantine army was the tagma or bandum, a cavalry squadron of 200-400 troops. The differences in the number of troops had to deceive the enemy concerning the extent of the army: "no tagma should be of the same size because if they are the enemy can easily estimate the extent of an army by counting the flags…likewise each squadron should bear two flags in order to deceive the enemy concerning the power of a unit".[7] Three or more tagma formed a brigade and three moira a division or meros of variable extent. Petersen noted

[3] Ibid.p. 35
[4] J.F.C. Fuller, *A military history of the Western World: from the earliest times to the battle of Lepanto,* vol.1 (New York: funk and Wagnalls 1954), p.395 apud, Petersen, .p70
[5] George T. Dennis, Ernst Gamillscheg, *Das Strategikon von Maurikios*, Verlag der Österreichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien, 1981, p.71.
[6]John Wiita, *The Ethnika in Byzantine military treatises,* Ph.Diss, University of Minnesota, 1977, apud Dennis-Gamillscheg, p.14
[7] Strategikon,II, 20, p141. The number of troops in these units was not large: a moira 3000 soldiers, a meros, 6000-7000 cavalrymen. Mauricius considered that a greate number than that would create difficulties in the command and control system of the troops.

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

after a few hundred years Napoleon organized his divisions in a similar manner. [8]

The Byzantine cavalry units were based on a mix of protection, mobility and firepower but before all on the theoretical foundation asserted by Mauritius himself: "the art of fighting depends on the closeness between the offensive and the defensive aspects, just like the structure of a building depends of the mingling of brick and mortar." [9]Thus, the author of the Strategikon discovered long before Western Europe that the striking power represented by the rain on arrows (with a suppressive role) cleared the way for impact represented by the charge of the lancers.

That is why during training, the mounted archers were placed **behind** the lancers, thus changing a millennium of military tradition, and were trained to aim high in order to avoid hitting their own troops.[10] The Byzantines abandoned precision tin favor of fast volleys of arrows and the result were astonishing. As for protection the cavalrymen used hooded inellar armor, the lancers form the first two rows used shields and the horses were protected with body armor and chamfron.[11] The tagma could fight in an open formation as offensive unit but also as a closed one in a defensive combat, depending on the terrain or moment of battle: usually during the charge the tagma had a closed formation, the mounted archers being protected by lancers, who were covered by the volleys of the archers.[12]

It is a tactic which was in concordance with the ideology of this stingy emperor: saving men and fighting materiel: „a ship cannot travel on a sea without helmsman, and no one can defeat the enemy without tactics and strategy. With all these and with the help of God it is possible to defeat an enemy not only equal but also superior in number. Because it is not true, as some inexperienced people believe, that battles are decided by courage and number of troops....but through tactics.(...)" [13]. Trying to engage the battle in an open field, face to face, it is a „very risky operation which can bring many

[8] Petersen, p.71

[9] Strategicon VII. p.231

[10] Strategicon III p.147 sqq, Petersen,.p. 71

[11] Strategicon I, p.81

[12] Petersen, .p.72. To note the fact that this type of battleformation is described by the Roman historians (more preciselly Putarh) for the Roman disaster at Carhae. In this battle, the cooperation between heavy cavalry and mounted archers lead to a spectacular Parthian victory. The only difference was that the battle was opened by the volleys of arrows, the cataphracts, armed with long spears, engaged the Roman after their battle lines were distroyed. For the full description of the battle see: Simon Anglim et alii, *Fighting tehniques of the ancient world.3000 BC-500 AD.* St.Martin s Press, New York, 2002, p.112 sqq.

[13] Strategicon, VII, p.229

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

losses (...) it is ridiculous to obtain such a costly victory and brings nothing more than an ephemeral glory."[14] Mauricius considered that an experienced general would not engage the enemy unless a really exceptional opportunity appears, and always will use surprise attacks not giving the enemy the chance to prepare himself.

Beyond this very rational aspect concerning battle management, any specialist in military ideology can observe the striking resemblances with other two major works of military art: „The art of war" by Sun-Tzu and „Epitome de rei militari" by Flavius Publius Vegetius. It is more than certain that Mauricius red Vegetius's work, fact shown by taking over (with little modifications) entire paragraphs in Book VIII. The question is: did the Byzantine emperor read the work of Sun-Tzu? Or there are just coincidences created by military ideologist which (with a difference of 1000 years between them) lived in states which had to put de basis of their army on mobility and striking power? Anyway, the remarks of the Chinese ideologist, especially ones concerning the behavior of the commander, the battle management and the philosophy of war are to be found again in the work of his Byzantine „comrade". Thus at Mauricius we can find a number of Sun-Tzu's most important considerations like:

1. All warfare is based on deception.[15]
2. „ Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.[16]
3. „ If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.[17]
4. For should the enemy strengthen his van, he will weaken his rear; should he strengthen his rear, he will weaken his van; should he strengthen his left, he will weaken his right; should he strengthen his right, he will weaken his left. If he sends reinforcements everywhere, he will everywhere be weak. [18]
5. A general both stupid and brave is a calamity. [19]etc

The work of Vegetius, *Epitoma de rei militaris*, 3rd Book, especially the part in which „the general rules of war" are presented, was taken over by Mauricius in his VIII - th Book without any major modifications:

1. Vegetius: „In war, he who spends more time watching in outpost and puts more effort into training soldiers, will be less subject to danger" [20]

[14] Strategicon, VII, p.231
[15] Sun Tzu, *Arta războiului,* (Traducere din limba franceză Raluca Pârvu), Ed. Samizdat, sine anno, p.10
[16] *Ibid* .p. 13
[17] *Ibid.* p.29
[18] *Ibid.*p.42
[19] *Ibid.* p. 58

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

2. Mauricius: „the one who stays at guard together with his army and put effort in training of the soldiers risk less in a war" [21]

3. Vegetius: It is preferable to subdue an enemy by famine, raids and terror, than in battle where fortune tends to have more influence than bravery[22]

4. Mauricius: it is better to weaken the enemy through treachery, raids and famine than to provoke him to an open fight where fortune is more important than bravery".[23]

5. Vegetius:"Opportunity in war is usually of greater value than bravery" [24](...) Good generals never engage in a general engagement excepting when opportunity offers, or under great necessity. [25]

6. Mauricius: „wars are not decided through courage and number of troops...but through tactics" [26]

7. Vegetius: „Bravery is of more value than numbers" [27]

8. Mauricius : „Courage and order are more useful than the number of the soldiers""[28]

9. Vegetius: „It is difficult to beat someone who can form a true estimate of his own and the enemy forces". [29]

10. Mauricius: „The one who cannot compare his own forces with one of the enemies can be easily deceived". [30]

11. Vegetius: „Surprises alarm the enemy, familiarity breeds contempt". [31]

12. Mauricius: „The unexpected and swift actions terrify the enemy, the ordinary ones become familiar". .[32]

Beyond taking over some paragraphs, Mauricius, like Sun-Tzu and Vegetius (as a fact like any war ideologist) understood that the best way to spare human and war material is not only the disinformation of the enemy but also misleading him during the conflict. Ambushes, diversions, cutting the

---

[20] Vegetius, *Epitome of military science.* Translated with notes and introduction by N. P. Milner, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1993, p.108 (*Epitome* in the following.)

[21] Strategikon VIII,2, p.279

[22] Epitome III p. 108.

[23] Strategikon VIII.2, p.279

[24] Epitome III p.110

[25] *Ibidem*,III p.109

[26] Strategikon VII, p.229

[27] Epitome III p.109

[28] Strategikon VIII, 2. p.279

[29] Epitome III p.109

[30] Strategikon VIII p.279

[31] Epitome, III p.109

[32] Strategikon VIII, 2. p.281

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

provisions lines are as important, if not more important, like the open field battle.

The conscious adaptations to the requirements of the conflict, innovation are the qualities of a good commander and especially of one who is leading such a highly mobile unit as a cavalry tagma."The assertion <i didn't expected that> is not worthy to a commander" [33]said the emperor-soldier paraphrasing (maybe) Sun-Tzu in his syntagm about knowing the enemy and knowing himself.

Strategikon represented the doctrinarian foundation for an effective answer to any threat from the neighbors of the Byzantine Empire.[34] The Byzantine cavalry[35] was a multirole unit who was engaged in reconnaissance operations, engaged the enemy through striking power, was an versatile assault unit and even could dismount and fight as infantry (like the French and English dragoons did many centuries later) „Thus, for all practical purposes, the seventh–century Byzantine meros was a combined arms formation-as versatile, in terms of the combat requirements of its day, as Napoleon's corps d'armee was to become 1,200 years later and superior, from the standpoint of its mobility, which was uniform throughout the formation, to that of the corps d'armee that was restricted to the marching speed of its infantry. So different, indeed, was the Byzantine meros from the cavalry that was to evolve in Western Europe that one must reach as far as 13th century Central Asia to find its nearest counterpart, in the Mongol tumen."[36]

In fact, only in the 20th century the importance of combined armed forces was (re)discovered through the armored divisions of Hans Guderian who, already in 1937 in his book „Achtung Panzer" wrote: „The tank like, any other weapon, cannot solve alone all the tactical problems, that is was armored cars without fast auxiliary forces are incomplete and cannot employ their full potential"[37].

---

[33] Strategikon VIII, 2. p.285

[34] Petersen, p.79.

[35] Petersen considers the term "cavalry" treacherous in the case of Byzantines because the cavalrymen had more roles than the Western medieval cavalrymen contemporary to Mauricius. Cf. Petersen p.79.

[36] *Ibid* p.79. For the massive mutations in the art of war in the Napoleonic age,see: Gunther E.Rothenberg, *The art of warfare in the age of Napoleon,*Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1980 (/books.google.ro/books?id=jxqdnKQrAmEC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Rothenberg+Art+of+Warfare+in+the+Age+of+Napoleon&hl=en&sa=X&ei=sIHtUqSrCMqQyAGQnIGIDw&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Rothenberg%20Art%20of%20Warfare%20in%20the%20Age%20of%20Napoleon&f=false).

[37] Hans Guderian, *Achtung-Panzer!* Union Deutsche Verlagesellschaft, Stuttgard, 1937, p.162 sqq. Also Petersen, p.79 ,n.65.

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)

Mauricius in the 6th century stipulated standards of protection, mobility and firepower obtained only 14 centuries later (although during the ages many theoreticians of war beginning with Leon VI and ending with Clausewitz and J.C. Fuller insisted on this aspect), a combination which represent the doctrinarian bases of contemporary war. Mauricius combined in an original way the military science of Western Europe with the experience and military tradition of the Far East creating a bridge between the Eastern and Western civilizations.

BDD-A23319 © 2015 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior”
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:13:58 UTC)