CHAPTER 8

Armament and Cavalry Warfare in the Avar-age Carpathian Basin

The appearance of the Avars signalled a new era in the military history of the Carpathian Basin. At the eve of the Avar conquest the Germanic people of the Carpathian Basin, the Lombards and Gepids, pursued a rather symbolic warfare: Alboin the Lombard king called on the enemy Gepid prince Thurismod for a duel.\(^1\) No similar event is mentioned in the written sources on the Avars, whereas the Avar army is frequently mentioned by Byzantine sources describing ceaseless combat in the Balkans until the siege of Constantinople in 626, during which the Avars often besieged fortified towns like Sirmium, Singidunum, Corinth and Thessaloniki.\(^2\) The strategic position of the Carpathian Basin changed which led to a fundamental transformation in Byzantine politics and diplomacy towards the northern Barbarians.\(^3\)

According to contemporary descriptions, the Avar army was not homogenous, neither ethnically or in respect of its fighting units, with Avars Kutrigurs,\(^4\) Gepids\(^5\) and Slavs\(^6\) being among them, and as well as the cavalry, there was also infantry, fleet\(^7\) and even artillery all playing a significant role.\(^8\) Avar warfare

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3. After the death of Justinian (565) significant changes occurred in Byzantine foreign affairs caused by the dramatic financial crisis of the Empire and probably by the personal ambitions of Justin II (Pohl 2002, 48–49).
4. The name of the Kutrigurs was last mentioned in a campaign in Dalmatia dated to 567 with the participation of 10,000 warriors (Pohl 2002, 60).
5. In a battle near the Tisza river in 599 Byzantine troops captured many Gepids and Slavs (Pohl 2002, 216). Gepidic and Slavic troops were also participating in the siege of Constantinople in 626 (Pohl 2002, 248).
6. Avars and Slavs were mentioned together during the Balkan campaigns but written sources were not able to distinguish them from one another (Bóna 1984a, 318). Slavic troops were attacking the sea-walls of Constantinople from the Golden Horn with their boats (Pohl 2002, 253).
7. For the Avar fleet on the Danube and building of a ship-bridge, see Bóna (1984a, 313) and Pohl (2002, 70–71).
8. Torsion artillery was first used by the Avar army during the siege of Apiairea in 586, where a Byzantine war-prisoner called Bousas told the Avars how to make catapults called...
should not, therefore, be reduced to ‘Nomadic warfare’, since several non-nomadic elements within the Avar army are also known as they confronted one of the biggest and most diverse armies of the contemporaneous world, the Byzantine army.

Significant technological innovations appeared together alongside the Avars during the 6th century, with the Avar transmission of the stirrup to Europe being more than probable, and therefore making the Avar army one of the most up to date at the turn of the 6th–7th century. Although the stirrup was already widely known in 4th century China and the Far East, the earliest stirrups in Europe were found in Avar graves, while these artefacts only appeared during the 7th century in the Merovingian world. The appearance of the stirrup in Byzantium was contemporary with the Avars as attested by the Strategy of Maurice from the end of the 6th century. The stirrup both facilitated the mounting of the horse and offered stability during its riding. Several interpretations of the known effect of the stirrup on medieval warfare and society have been suggested, however, it is important to note that the stirrup was not crucial for either horseback archery or for heavy cavalry since both fighting

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9 The first representations of stirrups are known from the 2nd century BC in India (Littauer 1981, 100, fig. 21), however, the hook represented is merely an early predecessor of the later stirrup. The first real stirrups are known from 4th century China from both representations and archaeological finds (Bivar 1955, 61–65; Littauer 1981, 102; Dien 1986, 33–34). It is important to note that the stirrup is not a Chinese invention, the earliest examples having been found in the Nomadic burials of Xianbei (Dien 1986, 33).

10 For early Avar stirrups: Kovrig 1955a; Kovrig 1955b.


12 The stirrups are mentioned as ‘σκάλα’ with the original meaning of ‘stairs’ (Maurikios XI/2, in Dennis – Gammilscheg 1981, 81). Maurice proscribes an Avar origin for several innovations in the Byzantine cavalry but not for the stirrup (von Freeden 1991, 624; Bálint 1993).

13 The first representation of a stirrup in China is known from a Jin burial from the year 302, though it was only a left stirrup facilitating the mounting of the horse, while the first stirrups used in pairs for riding is known from 322 (Dien 1986, 33).

14 The theory of Lynn White (1962, 1–38) is the best known, according to which the stirrup resulted in the formation of the heavy cavalry and of feudalism. However, this theory cannot be accepted for chronological reasons, since stirrups appeared in Western Europe much earlier than the supposed 8th century (Curta 2008, 302–310).

15 According to current knowledge based on archaeological finds and representations the Scythians, Parthians, Huns and even the Sassanians did not use stirrups.

16 Heavy cavalry is well known long before the European appearance of stirrups among the Sarmatians in the Middle East (Parthians and Sassanians), including even the Roman army (Cataphracts and Clibanarii), who did not use stirrups.