

Military Technology: Production and Use of Weapons

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1 Primary Sources: Problems and Interpretations

The primary sources for the study of eastern Roman arms and armour can be classified into three categories: (a) material sources (b) written sources – histories, chronicles, and the *Strategika* or *Taktika*, and (c) pictorial representations from ivory works, icons, illustrated manuscripts, church decorations (painting and sculpture), and mosaics.

Let me begin this section by sharing the negative view of a great number of modern scholars about the paucity of surviving artefacts and their pessimism about the possibility of creating a more general typology of the various types of Byzantine arms and armour, and swords in particular.¹ Although the level of archaeological information for the period from the second to the mid-fifth centuries has been reasonably good, no archaeological surveys have yet been conducted of Byzantine battlefields and one should not expect such work to produce satisfactory results for a number of reasons.²

Military rules regulating the behaviour of soldiers strictly forbade the discarding of arms and shields – the man who threw away his shield was considered a traitor.³ The phenomenon of the *ρίψασπις* or the *ἀσπίδαποβλής* – the discarding of the shield – had its roots in Antiquity⁴ and was severely punished in the Byzantine army: “If a soldier casts down his weapons in battle, we order that he should be punished for disarming himself and at the same time for arming the enemy”.⁵ Nicephoros Phocas also rebuked a soldier for discarding his

1 Koliass, *Waffen*, p. 140; Fehér, “Byzantine Sword Art”, 157–64; Nicolle, *Crusader Warfare*, p. 198; Grotowski, *Arms and Armour*, pp. 26–33, Porphyrogenitus 42; Parani, *Reconstructing the Reality of Images*, pp. 101–3; Aleksić, *Medieval Swords*, pp. 7–18; Babuin, *Όπλα*, pp. 15–17; Bugarski, “A Contribution to the Study of Lamellar Armours”, 161–79; Yotov, “A New Byzantine Type of Swords (7th–11th Centuries)”, 113–24.

2 Bishop/Coulston, *Roman Military Equipment*, pp. 128–49.

3 Morillo, “Expecting Cowardice”, 65–73.

4 Plato Phil., *Leges*, 944. 7; Aristophanes, *Pax*, 1186.

5 *Maurice’s Strategikon*, p. 20.

shield while on the march to Tarsus in 965, and he ordered that the soldier was to have his nose cut off.⁶ Leo VI and Maurice also describe special formations to strip the wounded and the dead of their precious weapons and armour.⁷ In addition, the spread of Christianity generally discouraged the deposition of arms as votive offerings or as grave-goods, which makes historians and archaeologists largely dependent on non-Christian burial sites.⁸ Underwater discoveries like the one at Serçe Limani off the coast of Asia Minor in 1973 can only bring a sense of optimism.⁹ Recently, however, a great amount of military equipment has been recovered in Bulgaria, and discussed in publications/a publication by Valeri Yotov and Raffaele D'Amato.¹⁰

The so-called *Strategika* or *Taktika* are literary works that contained constitutions and treatises of a military nature, which have been compiled by the author through personal experience or through oral tradition and other literary works of the past. These works greatly proliferated in the 10th century, when the Byzantines embarked on their conquests in the East and the Balkans, with the *Military Praecepts* of Nicephorus Phocas (c. 969) taking centre stage,¹¹ while Dennis has published a translation of three treatises *On Strategy* and tactics, probably all dating from the 10th century.¹² This kind of military literature is one of the fields in which cultural continuity between the Graeco-Roman world and Byzantium is more apparent.¹³ Some of these authors were inexperienced “antiquarians” who were largely copying previous works in the field (Leo VI’s *Tactica*¹⁴ and the *Sylloge Tacticorum*) and adapting them to contemporary reality. Others were experienced military officers and their works seem to reflect contemporary practices (*Strategikon*, Phocas’ *Military Praecepts*, the

6 Leo the Deacon, *Historia*, ed. Hase, p. 57 (Talbot/Sullivan, p. 105).

7 Maurice’s *Strategikon*, II. 9, pp. 29-30 (Mango/Scott, p. 450).

8 Kazanski, “Barbarian Military Equipment”, pp. 493-521. Sardinia and the necropolis of Pinguente (present-day Slovenia) are notable exceptions in the recovery of equipment from the 6th-8th centuries: Lilliu, “Milizie in Sardegna durante l’età bizantina”, pp. 105-36; Torcellan, *Le tre necropoli alto-medievali di Pinguente*.

9 Bass/Matthews/Steffy/van Doorninck, *Serçe Limani, An Eleventh-Century Shipwreck Vol. 1*.

10 Йотов, *Въоръжението и снаряжението от българското средновековие (VII-XI век)*; D’Amato, *The Varangian Guard 988-1453*.

11 Nicephorus Phocas’ *Military Praecepts* and an incomplete version of Nicephorus Uranus’ *Taktika* can be found in McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth*.

12 Rance, “The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister”, 701-37.

13 Theotokis, “From Ancient Greece to Byzantium”, pp. 106-18; Cosentino, “Writing about War in Byzantium”, 83-99.

14 It would be too simplistic to see Leo’s work as devoid of any originality: Theotokis, “Strategic Innovation,” 112-14.